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Phase 2 Evaluation of PlayBoard NI's Play Advocacy Programme (October 2012 - September 2015): Final Report

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**PLAYBOARD NI
PLAY ADVOCACY PROGRAMME**

**PHASE 2 EVALUATION
OCTOBER 2012 – SEPTEMBER 2015**

FINAL REPORT

Deena Haydon, Siobhán McAlister and Phil Scraton

***Childhood, Transition and Social Justice Initiative*
Queen's University Belfast**

March 2016

Childhood, Transition and Social Justice Initiative

The Initiative was founded to develop projects committed to challenging the structural marginalisation of children and young people. Our research is underpinned by principles of social justice and children's rights, aiming to raise public awareness and inform local policy and practice. It focuses on poverty and social exclusion, and the transitions experienced by all children and young people in the context of Northern Ireland's move from armed conflict to relative peace. We consider how the denial of rights impacts on the everyday lives of children and young people. Rather than focusing solely on the implementation of rights standards, we consider the contexts in which they have been developed, the structural barriers to their implementation and their potential for positive change. Further details about the Initiative are available at www.qub.ac.uk/ctsji

PlayBoard NI

PlayBoard is the lead agency for the development and promotion of children's and young people's right to play in Northern Ireland. To this end, the organisation provides a range of innovative services designed to strengthen service delivery. Since its inception in 1985, PlayBoard has campaigned, lobbied, raised awareness and developed partnerships in order to put play on the agenda of policy makers and resource providers. PlayBoard is a membership organisation and exists to promote, create and develop quality play opportunities aimed at improving the quality of children's lives. Further information about PlayBoard's work can be found at www.playboard.org

Evaluation of PlayBoard's Play Advocacy Programme

In 2009, PlayBoard secured funding from Atlantic Philanthropies to support the development of a Play Advocacy Programme intended to develop the advocacy, research, and practice capacity of the organisation to deliver a process of political and social change. Phase 1 of the programme began in January 2010 and was completed in September 2012. The Childhood, Transition and Social Justice Initiative successfully tendered to carry out a formative evaluation of Phase 1, producing a Final Report in January 2013 focusing on work completed between January 2010 and June 2012. Building on the learning arising from Phase 1, PlayBoard submitted an application to Atlantic Philanthropies for funding to establish and deliver Phase 2 of the Programme. This included plans to work strategically to establish effective alliances and partnerships, share learning, and establish a better balance between proactive and reactive advocacy work. Subsequently funding was provided to implement Phase 2 from October 2012 to March 2016. The Initiative was commissioned to conduct a smaller-scale evaluation of Phase 2, focusing on activities from October 2012 to September 2015. The evaluation included regular meetings with Programme staff, analysis of evidence files collated by the staff, a focus group with PlayBoard's Board of Directors, and interviews with twenty one key stakeholders.

PLAYBOARD PLAY ADVOCACY PROGRAMME EVALUATION: PHASE 2

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

PlayBoard's Play Advocacy Programme: Phase 2

Phase 2 of the evaluation of PlayBoard's Play Advocacy Programme covers the period October 2012 to September 2015, assessing the achievement of four outcomes which were established when the Programme began in 2010:

- *Outcome 1:* Strengthening understanding that children and young people are strong, competent social actors in and through their play; that they can effectively participate in decisions about their play; and that play is important for holistic development.
- *Outcome 2:* Strengthening the capacity and ability of key stakeholders to articulate children's and young people's play needs and rights.
- *Outcome 3:* Greater strategic understanding and recognition of the importance of children's and young people's right to play across social policy.
- *Outcome 4:* Enhancing opportunities for play/ supporting play opportunities.

Capacity Building with Practitioners and Northern Ireland Organisations

Capacity building is central to PlayBoard's work. 'Strengthening the capacity and ability of key stakeholders to articulate children's and young people's play needs and rights' (Outcome 2) can lead to 'greater understanding ... that play is important for holistic development' (Outcome 1), 'greater strategic understanding ... of the importance of ... play across social policy' (Outcome 3) and 'enhanced opportunities for play' (Outcome 4).

PlayBoard's involvement in capacity building includes:

- Influencing networks, forums and Northern Ireland bodies.
- Organising events to raise awareness about specific issues (eg the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child's General Comment No. 17 on the child's right to rest, leisure, play, recreational activities, cultural life and the arts).
- Supporting PlayBoard members through: provision of information, guidance, training; accessible resources; membership cluster events; PlayBoard's Annual Conference; and access to a dedicated keyworker.
- Contributing to publications such as practitioner magazines, research updates, academic texts and delivering presentations at PlayBoard's Annual Conference, external conferences, seminars and showcasing events to share key advocacy messages, research findings and examples of successful practice.
- Promoting the Playwork approach and workforce development: delivering Playwork-based training programmes; providing information about Playwork qualifications and careers; advocating for the inclusion of Playwork in the curricula of external training organisations; hosting the Playwork Education and Training Council for Northern Ireland (PETC.NI); lobbying to have Playwork recognised as the most appropriate qualification for school age childcare settings.
- Collaborating with other organisations to challenge negative representations of children, young people and play.

Key Findings

- Dissemination of accessible resources and information, in addition to participation on regional bodies and successful partnership working, were identified as strengths of the organisation and effective means through which PlayBoard raises understanding about children's and young people's play needs and rights in both policy and practice.
- Sustained involvement in local networks and forums whose remit is broader than 'play' ensures that play is an element of the local advocacy agenda; increasing understanding about the importance of play for holistic development and strengthening the capacity of other participants to articulate play needs and rights.
- Sharing information about children's play needs and rights using a range of methods, including *E-Play* and social media, ensures the delivery of PlayBoard's key messages across sectors or disciplines within and beyond Northern Ireland.
- PlayBoard has developed consultative skills with children and has collated evidence that supports its advocacy messages and demonstrates impact. Sharing these skills with member groups and other organisations is another means of capacity building.
- PlayBoard has significant strategic and practical roles in workforce development and promotion of Playwork.
- PlayBoard has advanced cross-organisational working as an effective means of lobbying for children's right to play.
- Building capacity improves advocacy in terms of the range of those who can advocate, and the impact of the messages being delivered.

Work with Children and Young People

PlayBoard's direct work with children and young people is diverse. Concerned primarily with 'supporting or enhancing opportunities for play' (Outcome 4), its work with children in schools and communities aims to 'strengthen understanding' among the adults involved about the 'importance of play for children's holistic development', and that 'children and young people are strong competent actors in and through their play' who can 'effectively participate in decisions about their play' (Outcome 1).

PlayBoard involves children and young people in research and consultations, providing clear examples of their competence 'as social actors ... who can effectively participate in decisions about their play' (Outcome 1). Not only does this 'strengthen children's and young people's capacity to articulate ... play needs and rights', it also strengthens the capacity of others to do this (Outcome 2). Further, their contributions inform 'greater strategic understanding and recognition of the importance of children's and young people's right to play across social policy' (Outcome 3).

- PlayBoard's Young Researchers Group has been involved in research at several levels: as 'participants' in the research of other organisations; as 'advisers' in development of a module about play in the Kids Life and Times Survey; and as 'researchers' involved in all stages of a research project about children's right to play.
- The Young Researchers Group is considered by government officials to be a useful contact and source of information in consultation about forthcoming policies.

- Government departments have commissioned PlayBoard to conduct consultations with children about specific policy developments or initiatives.

Key Findings

- PlayBoard has developed skills and expertise in facilitating consultation workshops with young children. This expertise is recognised by government departments and is an important element of PlayBoard's advocacy work.
- PlayBoard's expertise includes: retaining impartiality and being open to children's ideas or suggestions; using creative methods to gather and present children's views; making the process meaningful and relevant to children's lives; bringing children together from different backgrounds.
- The Young Researchers Group is one of the few peer research groups in Northern Ireland involving younger children. Their research about children's right to play and the resources they have developed provide an excellent example of how children's and young people's voices can be utilised effectively in campaigns and awareness-raising.
- Supporting children and young people to develop the skills required to be involved in all aspects of the research process requires staff expertise and resources to ensure that their participation is not tokenistic or partial.
- The work of the Young Researchers Group demonstrates the successful involvement of children as 'co'-researchers, and emphasises the importance of children's views to understanding about their needs, experiences and suggestions for change.
- Strengthening the capacity of children and young people as advocates remains central to PlayBoard's work. While resource intensive, the value of this approach is clear – both for the children/young people themselves and in influencing others.
- This evaluation confirms the impact of children's and young people's voices in influencing policy makers and practitioners.
- Sharing learning about the process of grounding campaigning and lobbying in child and youth research will encourage and inform the adoption of this approach by other organisations.
- 'Child-friendly' documents, including those produced by the Young Researchers Group and summaries of research/ consultation findings, are effective advocacy tools for (adult) policy makers.
- Developing one resource for a range of purposes is effective and efficient.

Work with Schools

PlayBoard's work in schools has contributed implicitly to 'strengthening understanding ... that play is important for children's holistic development' (Outcome 1) among school staff and 'increased opportunities for play' (Outcome 4) within the school playground. Given the centrality of schools in communities, programmes have also provided a useful means to inform parents, carers and community members about the value of play and to involve them in enhancing play opportunities beyond the school setting.

- The 'My Spaces - Positive Play' initiative was delivered in twenty single-identity primary schools and one special school within the Derry City Council area

between April 2011 and March 2014 using classroom and outdoor playground sessions to provide training for teachers, playground supervisors and other relevant staff in each school alongside activities for children.

- Between January 2013 and March 2015 the 'Spaces to Be' Programme was delivered to children in primary schools located at interfaces or communities where spaces are contested in East Belfast and in Newtownstewart, bringing together children from two schools in each community to play, have fun and build relationships while exploring identities through activities such as art, writing and drama. Cross-community play days were also organised in each location.
- The six-week 'Positive Playgrounds' programme was delivered in primary schools between September 2012 and May 2015. Aimed at teachers, classroom assistants and playtime supervisors, the programme supported schools to make the best use of their available space during playtimes - promoting positive outdoor play and learning opportunities. The programme explored play theory, play types, playground policy and ideas for co-operative games, highlighting the importance of 'tailoring' programmes using a structured approach based on evidence of successful practice. It also promoted school/ home links as parents were invited to contribute resources for playground activities.

Key Findings

- PlayBoard's work in schools endorses the value of play in achieving positive outcomes (promoting physical health and emotional well-being; enhancing personal and social development; promoting social inclusion; reinforcing positive behaviours; addressing sensitive topics).
- The 'My Spaces - Positive Play' initiative addressed identified need, enabling children to develop important personal and social skills while using their imaginations, being creative and feeling comfortable working with others. It influenced teachers' perceptions about play, particularly the importance of creative 'free' play and opportunities for risk-taking.
- The 'Spaces to Be' Programme used play to promote 'cross-community' interaction. In addition to 'humanising' study of other religions, the programme prompted interaction and discussion about potentially contentious events or practices through exploration of identity and belonging. Facilitated discussion increased understanding of commonality while encouraging children to appreciate diversity.
- The 'Positive Playgrounds' Programme enabled school staff to consider the importance of play for children's personal/ social development, establishing an ethos which encouraged creativity, co-operation and independence. Benefits included: more emphasis on play which was enjoyable and fun for children; embedding access to different types of play; fewer behavioural problems during playtimes and therefore less intervention by teachers and playground supervisors. A relatively small investment led to significant changes in playtime experiences for both children and staff.
- Involvement in PlayBoard programmes provided the catalyst for further activities in participating schools.
- Successful delivery of a programme increased school's interest in other PlayBoard activities, such as training for staff about playground activities.
- Successful involvement in the 'Positive Playgrounds' initiative provided the stimulus for one school to submit an application to the Big Lottery for additional

playground equipment and to discuss with PlayBoard the possibility of accreditation in recognition of the types of play established.

- Encouraging school staff to write about their experience of involvement in a programme for PlayBoard's *E-Play* Newsletter not only boosted their morale but also raised the profile of PlayBoard's work and its benefits with other schools.
- PlayBoard effectively used the same resource - *Spaces to Be: Mapping Identity and Belonging Toolkit* - with different audiences.
- PlayBoard successfully evidenced how play can provide a stimulus for promoting community relations using the *Spaces to Be – Mapping Identity and Belonging Toolkit*. This resource would provide the basis for designing programmes for schools which are responsive to the local context in a range of localities.

Work in Communities and with Councils

PlayBoard's work in communities and with Councils focuses on 'supporting play opportunities' (Outcome 4). To achieve this, and to ensure long-term impact, it may also be necessary to 'strengthen understanding that children and young people are strong, competent social actors in and through their play; that they can effectively participate in decisions about their play; and that play is important for holistic development' (Outcome 1); and to 'strengthen the capacity and ability of key stakeholders to articulate children's and young people's play needs and rights' (Outcome 2).

PlayBoard's work with communities includes:

- Community advocacy work, providing support for parents through members who are school age childcare providers, specific programmes in schools and communities, and via information provided on the PlayBoard website; advice for individual residents, parents and community groups about a range of play-related issues; and advocacy support to individuals or groups. PlayBoard has also carried out community audits, provided background information and/or papers in advance of meetings to support community lobbying.
- PlayBoard's Annual Play Day events provide an opportunity for member groups, community organisations, children, young people, parents/ carers, and Council representatives to increase their understanding about the value of play and learn skills that may enhance play opportunities.

PlayBoard's work with Councils has included:

- Developing a 3-year Play Strategy (2015-2018) for the new Armagh, Banbridge and Craigavon (ABC) 'super-Council', providing a model for adoption by other Councils.
- Conducting community consultations, carrying out play area reviews, mapping demographic patterns to identify potential areas of play deficiency and as a basis for recommendations about meeting play needs in specific locations. Councils have used this information to inform their decisions about future investment.
- Delivering the 'CAN Play' Activity Programme in Carrickfergus, Antrim and Newtownabbey Councils between April 2012 and October 2013. This used a Playwork approach to provide outdoor play sessions which encouraged and enabled free play in shared spaces. One recommendation arising from evaluation

of the Activity Programme was the need to embed understanding about the importance of play at community level, and to develop the skills of community based practitioners in planning and organising free play sessions. PlayBoard therefore devised a Play Leader Training Programme, which was delivered during April - June 2014.

Key Findings

- That individuals and community groups have contacted PlayBoard for advice and support demonstrates public knowledge and understanding about their advocacy role.
- Development of play opportunities is not necessarily expensive, especially if the resources used are recycled or activities are based on children using their imaginations in the available space.
- PlayBoard's contacts and relationships with Councils facilitated some of their advocacy work at the local level and, in most cases, a 'solution' to community concerns was achieved. Importantly, PlayBoard did not take sole responsibility but worked alongside local community representatives.
- There is clearly potential for PlayBoard to develop links with communities in the Republic of Ireland, contributing to the development of all-Ireland play advocacy work.
- Community planning is likely to be a significant 'driver' for community advocacy in the future. PlayBoard could use this as the basis of its work on protecting play spaces and developing play opportunities in communities and with Councils.
- PlayBoard's work in communities has entailed greater partnership working with Councils. Given limited funding, the need to pool resources and share learning, this has been beneficial and the involvement of local Councils should ensure sustainability of programmes.
- Working with the new 'super-Councils', it will be important to recognise the difficulties involved in clarifying the roles and responsibilities of diverse groups (including councillors, pre-school groups, education, youth service, police, community and voluntary sector organisations, residents associations), some of which do not recognise their role in promoting or providing play.
- PlayBoard has piloted successfully approaches to inform future work.
- The establishment and maintenance of positive relationships with Councils has enabled PlayBoard to provide practical advice and support to enhance play opportunities, contributing to increased understanding among councillors and other agencies about the value of play beyond fixed play parks.
- The 'CAN Play' Activity Programme encouraged whole family involvement and contributed to community cohesion, reinforcing the significance of children as active participants within their communities and the value of children's engagement in enjoyable, creative, imaginative play.
- Community-based practitioners involved in the 'CAN Play' Play Leader Training Programme valued the practical opportunities they had to put theory about planning and delivering outdoor play activities into practice in their own settings. Training and support developed for this Programme could be used to promote outdoor play opportunities with practitioners and volunteers in communities throughout Northern Ireland and in the Republic.

- PlayBoard has been effective in sharing learning about programme development, implementation and outcomes using accessible formats which have been widely disseminated.
- PlayBoard has used evaluation recommendations to further develop or progress programmes.

Work with Government

PlayBoard has aimed to achieve ‘greater strategic understanding and recognition of the importance of children’s and young people’s right to play across social policy’ (Outcome 3) using a combination of activities. Through these, it has also ‘strengthened the capacity and ability’ of government stakeholders ‘to articulate children’s and young people’s play needs and rights’ (Outcome 2).

PlayBoard’s work with government has included:

- Submitting consultation responses to DSD; DHSSPS; DENI; DEL; DARD and OFMDFM, highlighting the importance of play across government as well as within the work of individual departments.
- Conducting consultations with children and young people to inform government policies.
- Participating in a DoE Ministerial Summit on Planning and Community Benefits to inform debates about how planning could be more responsive to community need, raising awareness about the importance of protecting play spaces within the planning system.
- Representation on the DHSSPS Obesity Steering Group, highlighting the role of play in tackling childhood obesity and improving health.
- Engaging in discussions with OFMDFM, DEL, and DHSSPS regarding greater access to training courses to meet demand for qualifications among the play sector workforce.
- Lobbying about achievement of the actions identified in the *Play and Leisure Implementation Plan*. PlayBoard was invited to sit on a Play and Leisure Working Group to support a Programme Board progress roll-out of the Plan and has encouraged MLAs from all political parties to raise questions about play, including progression of the *Implementation Plan*, in the Northern Ireland Assembly.
- Identifying key areas requiring investment and supporting OFMDFM to develop a business case for funding. ‘Play and Leisure’ was subsequently adopted as the 7th signature project within the Northern Ireland Executive’s ‘Delivering Social Change’ initiative.
- Establishing the ‘Let Us Play’ campaign as a means of raising awareness about the importance of play, generating political and public support for realisation of the right to play, and supporting implementation of the *Play and Leisure Policy Statement* and associated *Implementation Plan*. The ‘Let Us Play’ campaign has provided a proactive means of engaging on a long-term basis with political representatives, parties and government departments about how decisions affecting play are made.
- Maintaining regular contact with the Junior Ministers and departmental officials whose work is play-related, helping policy makers and political advisors

understand why play is important and its relevance within social policy across government.

Key Findings

- Recognising their responsibility to gain the views of children during consultation processes, government officials appreciated the role that PlayBoard plays in gathering relevant information – especially from younger children. This has led to PlayBoard being commissioned to carry out consultations about topics beyond ‘play’.
- PlayBoard’s representation on departmental Steering or Working Groups, and involvement in Ministerial summits, ensures that children’s right to play is part of government debate.
- In addition to lobbying for recognition of qualifications based on the Playwork approach, PlayBoard has worked to increase access to appropriate training and professional development for the play sector workforce.
- Despite lack of progress in implementation of the *Play and Leisure Implementation Plan* due to insufficient funding, PlayBoard has maintained emphasis on achievement of the actions identified in the *Plan* within its advocacy work. Persistent lobbying for investment to support implementation of the *Plan* led to allocation of funding for ‘Play and Leisure’ as the 7th signature project within the Executive’s ‘Delivering Social Change’ initiative.
- The ‘Let Us Play’ campaign provided an ‘entry route’ for PlayBoard into government departments which previously would not have recognised the importance of play or the potential impact of their policies on play opportunities for children and young people. Subsequently, PlayBoard was invited to present to the Justice Committee, to submit written evidence to the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister, to meet the DHSSPS Children’s Champion and the Minister for DSD, and to give a presentation about the campaign to the DoE Children and Young People Working Group.
- PlayBoard has secured a positive reputation and established constructive relationships with department officials, leading to invitations to present to a range of departmental Groups.
- Through its strong and comprehensive networking, PlayBoard has established connections between those in government departments and organisations ‘on the ground’.
- Through long-term, supportive and co-operative relationships with the voluntary/ community/ statutory sectors and departmental officials, PlayBoard has successfully positioned itself as the lead organisation influencing social policy in relation to play.
- PlayBoard has utilised a range of methods to ensure that children’s play needs and rights are on the political agenda. This includes developing campaigns reflecting the views and experiences of children, providing departmental briefings, and establishing Ministerial Summits with colleagues in the 4-Nations Policy Forum.
- Challenging perception of play as a ‘soft’ or ‘fluffy’ topic, PlayBoard has successfully raised awareness about the importance of play as fundamental to the life and development of children/ young people and connected to other entitlements.

- Departmental officials have recognised the positive relationships established with PlayBoard staff and have welcomed collaboration, perceiving this to be mutually beneficial. The provision of relevant information is a critical element of work with government as this evidence can be used to strengthen strategic outcomes or build a case for specific priorities and ways of working.
- Direct engagement with key officials, politicians and departmental Children's Champions, to explain what the issues are and how these inform the work of their Department, remains vital. Presentation of written and oral evidence can also help 'shape' the direction and/or content of policies.
- Despite restricted funding to establish new initiatives, PlayBoard's advocacy work informs policy and planned practice, widening the focus of existing policies to include consideration of play and children/ young people.
- Working with other organisations to raise specific concerns and make recommendations for change has strengthened key messages as a collective response is harder for government to ignore.
- In addition to monitoring implementation of relevant policies, PlayBoard informs the process of policy/ strategy development. Adoption of a pre-emptive approach was endorsed by departmental officials.
- Promotion of children's rights by PlayBoard and other organisations has contributed to a significant change in attitudes and use of language by politicians in Northern Ireland, with reference to the UNCRC and specific Articles now common in Assembly debates or questions.

Work with UK and International Bodies

In addition to its work within Northern Ireland networks and forums, PlayBoard is represented on UK and international bodies working to influence understanding and promoting play. Contributing to achievement of the Play Advocacy Programme objectives, this work affirms 'understanding that children and young people are strong, competent social actors in and through their play; that they can effectively participate in decisions about their play; and that play is important for holistic development' (Outcome 1), 'strengthening the capacity and ability' of colleagues beyond Northern Ireland 'to articulate children's and young people's play needs and rights' (Outcome 2).

This work has included:

- Contributing to the process of reporting to the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child about implementation of the UNCRC in the UK; attending an OFMDFM workshop in November 2013 about the draft State Party report to the UN Committee; contributing to consultation workshops held by Children's Law Centre and Save the Children NI to inform development of the *Northern Ireland NGO Alternative Report* submitted to the Committee in June 2015.
- Regular collaboration with representatives from play organisations in Britain, the play industry and the wider leisure sector through the 4-Nations Play Safety Forum. Highlighting the importance of ensuring that children experience 'good risk' in play to support their learning and development, the Forum engages in a process of influencing to affect 'cultural change' and challenge the dominance of risk aversion.

- Involving PlayBoard's equivalents in Scotland, Wales and England, the 4-Nations Play Policy Forum organises a bi-ennial Play Symposium for officials and Ministers from each country and provides a platform for sharing information about play policy and practice.
- Participating as an active member of the International Play Association: Promoting the Child's Right to Play (IPA).

Key Findings

- Reference to issues raised during consultation workshops and publications co-authored by PlayBoard staff ensured that the section about 'play and leisure' in the *Northern Ireland NGO Alternative Report* highlighted a range of evidence-based concerns regarding implementation of children's right to play.
- Through the 4-Nations Play Safety Forum, collaboration with PlayBoard's counterparts in England, Wales and Scotland has led to development of collectively agreed messages with key organisations such as the Health and Safety Executive which are then adapted to suit the context of each jurisdiction.
- The 4-Nations Play Policy Forum provides an important medium for regular contact between the CEOs of PlayBoard, Play Wales, Play Scotland and Play England. This collaborative commitment enhances PlayBoard's lobbying in Northern Ireland.
- The 4 nations promote play in communities every year through the PlayDay campaign.
- Campaigns developed by the 4-Nations Safety Forum and the 4-Nations Play Policy Forum reinforce the strength of a collective voice when lobbying about specific issues and highlight the need for innovative campaigns aimed at achieving sustained impact.
- The 4-Nations Play Symposia demonstrate the benefits of establishing an opportunity for cross-jurisdictional knowledge exchange at Ministerial level.
- Delivering presentations at the triennial International Play Association conferences ensures that PlayBoard's work in Northern Ireland is shared with an international audience and informed by international 'best practice'.

Summary of Learning and Future Developments

Achievement of Strategic Outcomes and Objectives

This evaluation demonstrates that the strategic aim to 'advocate play for social, political and personal change' was achieved through the objectives: 'provide an effective voice for play'; 'inform and influence decision making at all levels'; and 'grow an evidence base for play and practice'.

PlayBoard has worked strategically to establish effective alliances and partnerships; share learning; and achieve a balance between proactive and reactive advocacy work – successfully achieving its plans for the second phase of the Play Advocacy Programme.

Building on Good Practice

The evaluation provided an opportunity for the key stakeholders with whom PlayBoard works to reflect on what the organisation does and the approach it

adopts. Their perceptions and comments highlighted a wealth of good practice, which should be celebrated and maintained:

- Acknowledging PlayBoard's positive reputation.
- Building on PlayBoard's perceived expertise.
- Capacity building.
- Sustaining involvement in regional networks and forums.
- Promoting partnership working.
- Pooling resources.
- Building and maintaining relationships across a range of sectors.
- Facilitating a Young Researchers Group.
- Using the power of children's and young people's voices to ground advocacy in the issues of concern to them.
- Piloting an approach and then replicating successful practice.
- Using PlayBoard resources for a range of audiences and for multiple purposes.
- Sharing learning from programmes and about the process of grounding campaigns in child and youth research using accessible formats.
- Recognising workers' skill and enthusiasm.
- Providing a structured programme of work and additional support materials in work with schools.
- Building on positive involvement in programmes to offer specific training, engage participants in new initiatives and disseminate examples of successful practice.
- Supporting organisational applications for additional funding to consolidate and expand programmes.
- Promoting play as a stimulus for inclusion and 'cross-community' initiatives.
- Using evidence of need and issues identified during consultations with children and those working with them to inform political advocacy work.
- Successfully organising events to raise awareness about specific issues and targeting key personnel.
- Inviting Junior Ministers and key civil servants to present at PlayBoard Conferences and events alongside academics or play 'experts'.
- Facilitating consultations with young children to inform the development of strategies/ policies.
- Influencing social policy using a broad range of activities.

Potential Developments

Internal PlayBoard Practice

The process of evaluation has prompted consideration of PlayBoard's processes for gathering and analysing information. The following suggestions focus on internal procedures aimed at supporting critical analysis of completed work in terms of achievement of intended outcomes and impact.

In terms of continuing development of these processes:

- When considering data collection, all staff should be clear about what needs to be recorded, why, and how information might be used:
 - Clarifying the difference between 'outputs' (tangible products) and 'outcomes' (intended changes)

- Linking analysis of information gathered to intended outcomes (ie which outcome(s) does this information demonstrate achievement of?)
- Using information gathered to describe the process (ie this is what we did and how we did it)
- Collating and providing evidence of impacts (ie this is what changed)
- Considering how information collected can be used for multiple purposes.
- Recording and analysis of evidence should be embedded within all programmes.
- Intended outcomes should be clearly identified and shared with all partners when programmes are established.

To further embed 'impact practice':

- Programme evaluations should include evidence about perceived impacts concerning the advocacy-related outcomes.
- Potential opportunities for influencing policy and practice should be identified during the planning stage of any programme.
- On-going tracking and follow-up of PlayBoard consultation responses is required.

Work with External Organisations and Bodies

Analysis of completed work and feedback from key stakeholders has highlighted areas for potential development of PlayBoard's work with external organisations and bodies:

- Explaining how and why PlayBoard is 'Northern Ireland's lead organisation for children and young people's play'.
- Evidencing how play can provide a stimulus for promoting community relations.
- Developing a form of accreditation for organisations which have developed creative, innovative play opportunities.
- Promoting PlayBoard's work through community planning.
- Supporting Councils to recognise the value of play.
- Supporting Councils to lobby for the allocation of resources to appoint Designated Play Officers and Play Development Officers.
- Continuing to challenge the 'risk averse' assumptions of parents, schools, Councils and others working with children/ young people.
- Strengthening the potential for sustainability of programmes/ practice.
- Considering how PlayBoard can contribute to the development of all-Ireland play advocacy work.
- Building on ad hoc work.
- Continuing to share learning about PlayBoard's advocacy work.
- Continuing to use the media, including social media, to promote key messages.
- Continuing to identify the wider value of play.
- Continuing to identify 'play champions' in government departments, proactively engaging with them when policies/ strategies/ funding opportunities are being developed as well as when they have been produced.
- Continuing to lobby about implementation of the *Play Policy Statement* and *Play and Leisure Implementation Plan*.
- Continuing advocacy work to address the issues raised within the *Northern Ireland NGO Alternative Report* to the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child.
- Continuing to promote and protect children's play needs and rights.

1. PLAYBOARD'S PLAY ADVOCACY PROGRAMME

1.1 Phase 1

In 2009, PlayBoard secured funding from Atlantic Philanthropies to support the development of a Play Advocacy Programme intended to develop the advocacy, research, and practice capacity of the organisation to deliver a process of political and social change aimed at:

- influencing political attitudes towards play and the importance of play;
- influencing policy decisions at political and government department level;
- supporting PlayBoard membership to become effective advocates for play;
- supporting communities to become advocates for play.

This focused on the achievement of four outcomes:

- *Outcome 1:* Strengthening understanding that children and young people are strong, competent social actors in and through their play; that they can effectively participate in decisions about their play; and that play is important for holistic development.
- *Outcome 2:* Strengthening the capacity and ability of key stakeholders to articulate children's and young people's play needs and rights.
- *Outcome 3:* Greater strategic understanding and recognition of the importance of children's and young people's right to play across social policy.
- *Outcome 4:* Enhancing opportunities for play/ supporting play opportunities.

In seeking to achieve these outcomes four Programme staff were recruited – two Play Development Officers, a Senior Research and Policy Officer and a Senior Advocacy Officer. Phase 1 of the programme started in January 2010 and was completed in September 2012.

In September 2010, the Childhood, Transition and Social Justice Initiative at Queen's University Belfast successfully tendered for the formative evaluation of Phase 1 of the Programme. The agreed scope and purpose of the evaluation was to chart progress (with retrospective information collected about activities conducted January - September 2010); measure success; highlight the impact of the Programme in achieving its planned activities, outputs and outcomes; and provide clear guidance on the future development and growth of the Programme. An action research methodology was adopted to ensure the evaluation process informed the Programme's development and ways of working as it progressed. This included suggestions about areas of work that could be developed; how outcomes might be further progressed; and other work that might be undertaken, resources permitting. An Interim Report (covering January 2010 - May 2011) was produced in September 2011 and the Final Report, produced in January 2013, covered those first 16 months plus the final year (ie January 2010 – June 2012).

The following recommendations were made:

Practice

- Continuing support for projects and organisations to ensure sustainability beyond the life of the initial programme. This could be achieved by offering training, play sessions and retaining contact via email.
- Maintaining and building on good contacts established with Housing Associations through the practice work in Cliftonville and Sailortown, with the aims of influencing planning and housing development, and promoting children's play needs and rights.
- Articulating explicitly the connection between play and housing development or regeneration, lobbying for statutory guidance that includes play at the planning level. In seeking partners and supporters, demonstrating the link between play and wider community, housing and environmental issues.
- Rolling out models of community-based work to and within other communities.
- Articulating and implementing learning from partner groups, particularly those involved in rights-based and advocacy work (eg LYL/ CCRF – to establish ways of working with young advocates; PPR – to develop work with communities focusing on the realisation of rights).
- Ensuring that the views of children and young people are routinely collected to inform Programme design, development, review, as well as case studies, presentations and publications.
- Conducting an end of project evaluation as part of any exit strategy (focusing on successes, difficulties, learning and perceived impacts).

Research and Policy

- Continuing PlayBoard representation on relevant Forums, Networks, Alliances as the sole organisation advocating for the right to play.
- Continuing lobbying to ensure that the rhetoric of 'early intervention' and investment in early years becomes a reality, particularly during a period of budgetary constraints.
- Continuing to track the impact of PlayBoard's consultation responses to assess the value of this approach for influencing policy and highlighting successes.
- Continuing to monitor progress in the implementation of actions from the *Play and Leisure Implementation Plan* to inform future lobbying and as evidence in holding government to account.
- Continuing to emphasise the responsibilities of each government Department with reference to: UNCRC Article 31 and other relevant rights, the high level outcomes in the *Strategy for Children and Young People*, targets in the *Programme for Government*, actions in the *Play and Leisure Implementation Plan*.
- Continuing to make clear the implications of the right to play within key areas of policy and practice (eg health and well-being, education, youth services, community safety, play spaces within planning) and encouraging government Departments to demonstrate how children's play needs and rights will be promoted in specific policies or strategies.
- Developing and promoting opportunities for collaborative lobbying with other organisations.
- Securing PlayBoard representation on the Children and Young People's Strategic Partnership, with the aim of promoting the significance of play in the planning and commissioning of children's services.

- Using the *Rights-Based Play Assessment Framework* to promote the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child's *General Comment on Article 31* (when it is adopted in 2013) and contribute to the forthcoming (2014) process of reporting to the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child as part of the next UK Government examination.

Advocacy

- Continuing to update members about project work, advocacy work and PlayBoard publications via the *e-play* newsletter. This might also include links to articles (eg IP-DIP article; IPA article).
- Expanding the involvement of children and young people in policy advocacy (eg NIYP lobbying on safe spaces; groups working to challenge negative stereotypes of young people).
- Preparing those advocating on their own behalf (eg children and young people, community members, PlayBoard members) for negative responses, low turn out and lack of change.
- Exploring the potential of focused advocacy sessions with members in cluster areas.
- Replicating the model of working with members (Husting events, Advocacy Workshops, Toolkits, follow-up email and telephone support) at different times (eg pre-elections) and in relation to a range of play-related issues.
- Distributing *e-play* beyond members via forums with which PlayBoard has contact (eg QUB Research Forum for the Child; QUB Child Care Research Forum; QUB Childhood, Transition and Social Justice Initiative; CiNI briefing; NICVA e-newsletter).
- Continuing work with 'play advocates' in political parties – raising awareness about play-related issues and lobbying about progressing the actions in the *Play and Leisure Implementation Plan*.

Other Potential Developments

- Continuing support to enable children and young people to articulate their play needs and advocate for realisation of their right to play.
- Continuing to work with communities, Councils, sectoral representatives and government Departments to challenge negative perceptions of young people and assumptions about 'anti-social' behaviour associated with young people's presence in public spaces. This includes lobbying for provision of appropriate leisure and 'free-time' opportunities for young people.
- Considering the specific play and leisure needs of 'vulnerable' groups (eg children and young people who are disabled, young carers, looked after, care leavers, and those from minority ethnic communities).
- Highlighting key issues and lobbying for improved provision for those who are most economically and socially marginalised. While some representations of children and young people attract sympathy, others do not (eg 'young people in conflict with the law').
- Continuing to support local communities, Councils, PlayBoard members, other organisations and government Departments in their consultations with children and young people about decisions affecting their play needs and rights, ensuring they receive feedback about their contributions and how these influenced decisions.

- Continuing to inform parents' perceptions about children's play needs and rights, playwork, and events promoting play via PlayBoard members and through dissemination of key advocacy messages in publications, on the PlayBoard website, through *e-play*, and via local media.
- Involving children and young people in resource development, lobbying activity such as Husting-type events, and Council Partnerships.
- Developing connections with rural communities and highlighting rural issues. There is a sense that training, seminars and practice work is Belfast and urban centred. In taking advocacy work forward, rural play and/or rural childcare are potential areas for development. PlayBoard's work should be show-cased in rural areas.
- Building methods of evaluation into the work of the organisation to assess and demonstrate impact when the work of the evaluation team has ended. Methods of evaluation (including learning, benefits, proposed use of information, and recommendations for future sessions), should be a core element of all play sessions, workshops, training and events.
- Continuing the development of practical resources to be used for a range of purposes and with a variety of audiences. Drawing on information collected through research, consultations, evaluations and events to articulate key messages based on statistics, stories, photographs, quotes and examples.
- Promoting 'knowledge transfer' based on the work of the Advocacy Programme. PlayBoard has a potential role in training about advocacy work (with children and young people; with communities; at policy level) using tools, Toolkits and case studies as models of practice which combine advocacy and community development work or link research to policy and advocacy.
- Considering the strategic processes required to ensure 'mainstreaming' of community-based play and advocacy work. Identifying sources of core funding for PlayBoard, or another agency such as Council Play Development Officers, to continue the work in Cliftonville and Sailortown and to establish similar projects across Northern Ireland. A proposal could be developed for submission to OFMDFM or as part of a cross-Departmental initiative.
- Developing additional resources, funds permitting:
 - A pack for schools and youth centres containing monitoring information and tools, based on work in Lower Shankill.
 - A pack based on the work of RSPP including: template letters to residents; sample baseline and follow-up survey; press releases; leaflets; training sessions; play and street session plans.
 - An Advocacy Toolkit produced in consultation with, and for, young people.
 - A resource on developing Play and Leisure Partnerships for Councils.
 - Case studies focusing on specific elements of the Programme.
- Considering the development of future work focusing on specific issues raised during this evaluation: promoting use of 'unclaimed' sites, available open spaces and existing facilities which are currently not used during evenings, at weekends, or through school holidays; countering fears or concerns about 'risk' and 'safety'; challenging negative perceptions about young people; developing work with specific groups; developing play in schools.

1.2 Phase 2

At the conclusion of Phase 1, two of the four staff employed on the Play Advocacy Programme had moved to posts in other organisations, one had retired, and one had been re-deployed within PlayBoard. However, building on the learning arising from Phase 1, PlayBoard submitted an application to Atlantic Philanthropies for funding to establish and deliver Phase 2. This included plans to work more strategically to establish effective alliances and partnerships, share learning, and strike a better balance between proactive and reactive advocacy work - advocating more for what it wanted to achieve (ie better and improved play outcomes for children) than highlighting what it was against (ie poor policy decisions). Recognising the need for flexibility, PlayBoard planned to engage policy makers early in the process of policy development, using well-researched evidence and offering informed solutions to reduce the incidence of reactive situations. This consolidated an organisational belief that the voice of reason is harder to ignore, dismiss or dispute.

Acknowledging that fundamental change often requires action at multiple levels - political, policy and grass roots - Phase 2 aimed to influence:

- people who affect the general context for play – informing policy makers
- people in a position to provide or encourage play – informing practitioners and other organisations
- children and young people – empowering them to claim their right to play
- families – helping them acquire a better understanding of the value of play
- communities – helping them appreciate and promote places/ spaces for play.

Funding was provided to implement Phase 2 from October 2012 - March 2016. This involved the appointment of a Senior Research Officer and a Senior Advocacy Officer.

The organisation's *Strategic Plan 2013-2016* established a new 'vision': 'A society where the right to play is realised' and PlayBoard's 'mission' became: 'Driving the play agenda'. One of the three strategic aims linked to the Play Advocacy Programme - 'Advocate play for social, political and personal change' – was intended to be achieved through three strategic objectives: 'Provide an effective voice for play'; 'Inform and influence decision making at all levels'; 'Grow an evidence base for play and practice' (*PlayBoard Strategic Plan 2013-2016*: 8).

The Childhood, Transition and Social Justice Initiative was commissioned to carry out an evaluation of Phase 2, covering activities from October 2012 to September 2015.

1.3 Evaluation Process and Methodology

The information presented in this report is based on analysis of various sources of data. This section provides a brief overview of the evaluation process.

Meetings with PlayBoard Staff

Following meetings to establish the evaluation process, regular consideration of plans and progress enabled the evaluation team to capture the range of activities undertaken and maintain a detailed overview of work carried out under the umbrella of the Play Advocacy Programme. Meetings with key staff (Senior Research Officer, Senior Advocacy Officer, Director of Service Delivery and Development) also provided opportunities to clarify the evidence available a) to evaluate whether intended outcomes had been achieved and b) to identify perceived impacts.

PlayBoard Evidence Files

The information within evidence files collated by Programme staff was analysed to assess achievement of Play Advocacy Programme outcomes and impacts. This included: PlayBoard Annual Reviews (2013, 2014); PlayBoard Strategic Plan 2013-2016 and Operational Plans (2013-2014, 2014-2015, 2015-2016); Seminar Proceedings (General Comment No. 17: a call for action for Article 31); presentations (about General Comment No. 17 for Council child protection officers, 2013; IPA Conference, 2014); reports to Atlantic Philanthropies; PlayBoard Annual Conference Report 2013; Young Researchers Update Reports; ARK Research Updates; iP-D!P articles; press releases re 'Spaces to Be' initiative in Newtownstewart; programme update (Inspiring Impact); programme evaluations ('Spaces to Be' in Newtownstewart and East Belfast; 'CAN Play' in 3 partner Councils); draft Play Strategy for ABC Council and feedback; assessments of play provision and consultations provided to groups and Councils; briefings for government departments and Committees ('Let Us Play' Campaign); analysis of political party manifestos; Hansard transcript (4-Nations Play Symposium); background papers (Roundtable discussion with MPs); review of the Play and Leisure Implementation Plan, draft evidence review, and notes of the Play and Leisure Working Group meeting; PlayBoard response to consultations re the Childcare Strategy. Relevant documentation is referenced throughout this Report.

Focus Group and Interviews with Key Stakeholders

A focus group was held in June 2015 with five members of PlayBoard's Board of Directors and an additional member provided a written response to questions. Face-to-face or telephone interviews were conducted with twenty one key stakeholders between July and September 2015. These included one of the Junior Ministers whose remit includes children and young people; six Departmental officials; three Council representatives; two representatives from the office of the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People; two academics; three primary school Principals; and four representatives from the UK/ international play sector. Thorough knowledge of the Programme's work provided the basis for the evaluators to focus on specific examples or areas of work during discussions with these stakeholders, rather than general questions about whether the Programme had achieved its intended outcomes. Points raised by these interviewees have been incorporated as illustrative quotes throughout the Report.

1.4 Report Overview

This Report presents an analysis of PlayBoard's Play Advocacy work carried out between October 2012 and September 2015, themed under specific areas: capacity building with practitioners and Northern Ireland organisations; work with young people; work with schools; work in communities and with Councils; work with government; work with UK and international bodies. Each section provides a description of the types of work carried out, a case study, and key findings. The final section provides a summary of learning before identifying potential internal and external developments.

2 CAPACITY BUILDING WITH PRACTITIONERS AND NORTHERN IRELAND ORGANISATIONS

2.1 Overview of Work

PlayBoard workers have been involved in a range of capacity building activities. While having an impact on all outcomes, this work relates most clearly to 'strengthening the capacity and ability of key stakeholders to articulate children and young people's play needs and rights' (Outcome 2). Key stakeholders include: children and young people; parents; member groups; school-aged child care workers; the voluntary and community child and youth sector; Councils; the statutory sector, including departmental representatives. Specific examples of capacity building with children and young people, Councils and political representatives are highlighted in later sections.

Capacity building is key to the work of the organisation, providing a foundation for achieving other intended outcomes. Enhancing the capacity' of others to articulate play needs and rights can lead to, or be used to advocate for, 'greater understanding of the importance of play for children's holistic development' (Outcome 1), 'greater strategic understanding of the importance of children's right to play across social policy' (Outcome 3) and 'enhanced opportunities for play' (Outcome 4).

Articulating the importance of capacity building to the organisation, and its ultimate aim, a PlayBoard Board Member stated:

'PlayBoard's core business is training and support for groups on the ground. This will help to increase the quality of children's experiences.'

Capacity building takes many forms. Over the course of the three-year evaluation period this has included the following activities which have influenced policy, practice and understanding, demonstrating that PlayBoard has worked strategically to establish effective alliances and partnerships:

Membership of Networks, Forums and Northern Ireland Bodies

Long-term involvement in key networks and forums ensures that the issue of play has been considered in discussions relating to child poverty, children's budgeting, childcare, establishment of a statutory duty to co-operate and implementation of children's rights. Through this mechanism PlayBoard has shared messages about play, kept the issue of play on the agenda, and raised understanding about the right to play:

'The "Reclaiming the Streets" Project was great. I'd quote that quite a bit – enabling children to play where they are. I've heard PlayBoard talk about the importance of play more broadly – not just fixed play equipment but being able to build things, interact with the environment and so on. They challenge the idea of children's play as a nuisance. They promote a more positive approach. And that's extended to teenagers too.' (NICCY representative)

The impact of PlayBoard's representation on networks and forums was discussed by voluntary and community sector representatives in the previous evaluation, and it is evident that this work has continued:

'We should recognise the tenacity, resilience, patience of PlayBoard employees – keeping play on the agenda has continued and is nurtured. That makes a real difference.' (PlayBoard Board of Directors)

Alongside other children's sector organisations, PlayBoard attends quarterly meetings of the Child Rights Implementation Group established by the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People (NICCY) to exchange information about work focused on promoting and protecting children's rights. Reflecting specifically on PlayBoard's involvement on NICCY's NGO and Participation Forums, the former Children's Commissioner stated:

'It was important that they had a place at the table. They contributed to general debate around rights as well as to understanding about UNCRC Article 31.'

While each organisation has its own priority areas, she recognised the importance of sharing expertise and information:

'For every organisation, some issues are core and others are more marginal ... you need access to information about what others are doing and issues of concern, with mechanisms for this exchange of information.'

PlayBoard is represented on the Health and Social Care Board Research Ethics Committee and also on the Children and Young People as Researchers (CYPAR) Network. This is an indication of external recognition of PlayBoard's expertise in consulting with children and conducting child-led research (see Section 3).

PlayBoard's representation on regional bodies is perceived as a useful means of influencing policies and achieving specific objectives:

'Value for money with play is difficult. You can use arguments like reducing obesity ... These are the issues PlayBoard needs to harp on about – the value of sport and play. PlayBoard is represented on the Sports Matter Implementation Group (SportNI). That's important. They've done well to get on this and should continue to be there.' (Council representative 1)

Advocacy Focused on Children's Right to Play

A range of events was set-up, hosted and facilitated by PlayBoard in order to raise awareness of the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child's (2013) *General Comment No. 17 on the right of the child to rest, leisure, play, recreational activities, cultural life and the arts* (UNCRC Article 31) and to enhance the ability of key stakeholders to articulate the play needs and right of children and young people (Outcome 2). In April 2013, a dedicated seminar and roundtable discussion was co-hosted with the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People, in partnership with the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister (OFMDFM), the International Play Association (IPA) and the Centre for Children's Rights at Queen's University Belfast. This was attended by 70 people, including the two Junior Ministers whose remit includes children and young people, the Children's Commissioner, academics, policy makers, government officials, organisations and individuals with responsibility for delivering culture, leisure and play services, and practitioners working with children of all ages. The seminar proceedings, including copies of each presentation and notes from subsequent discussions were

disseminated to attendees and made available through PlayBoard's website and social media channels. PlayBoard's 2014 Conference, attended by PlayBoard members, representatives from the voluntary, community, statutory and government sectors, was also dedicated to this issue.

Attendees were provided with the report and poster on General Comment No. 17 produced by PlayBoard's young researchers (see Section 3). This reinforced understanding of children as strong competent social actors who can effectively participate in decisions about play (Outcome 1). An additional paper submitted to OFMDFM on developing performance indicators relating to the General Comment confirmed PlayBoard as the lead authority on play rights in Northern Ireland.

Noting PlayBoard's work in promoting the General Comment, the Chair of the International Play Association stated: *'the active stance they've taken on this and the way they've maximised the impact of it'*. This proactive approach was consistent with one of the stated aims of Phase 2 of the Play Advocacy Programme: striking a better balance between proactive and reactive advocacy work. Its impact was recognised by a NICCY representative, who stated:

'They were quick to inform people about the General Comment on Article 31, which came out at the same time as a couple of other General Comments ... But the one on play got a lot of attention because PlayBoard were on the ball about it.'

This advocacy work is an example of PlayBoard leading on promotion of play rights. It drew on the organisation's expertise, resources and established contacts to bring together diverse groups of stakeholders, enhancing their understanding and capacity to articulate children's and young people's play needs and rights (Outcome 2). This was recognised as a feature of PlayBoard's work and successful influencing:

'They are very good at getting the international figures in and then marrying that to the right local people for the combination of "here's the new thinking and here's the people who need to be in the room to listen and ultimately to engage and be engaged". I think they're clever about that.' (Academic 2)

The range of organisations and representatives who attended events related to General Comment No. 17 was testament to PlayBoard's long-term work in building relationships across sectors and government departments. Regarding investment in strategic relationship-building to raise understanding of play needs and rights, the same interviewee observed:

'... you can see that they're really trying to work towards their policy makers and their local Councils. You do get that feeling that they've built those relationships. And because they've got the relationships those people, busy as they are, turn up to these events and they're welcome at them. It's almost like they have managed to pull off that NGO/ statutory sector 'community' in this area, which is a hard one to pull off.' (Academic 2)

Work with Councils and policy makers is further discussed in Sections 6 and 7.

Supporting PlayBoard Members

PlayBoard provides support, guidance and training for its members. Building on the findings and recommendations of the previous evaluation, PlayBoard continued to provide to its membership information on play needs and rights, and how to advocate for these, through a variety of mediums. Electronic means of distributing information through the E-Play monthly newsletter, PlayBoard website, PlayBoard Facebook Page and Twitter account remain useful ways to disseminate information about policy, campaigns, projects and programmes, funding opportunities and events widely and efficiently. Evidencing the organisational emphasis on advocacy, this area of the website has been re-developed.

Alongside this, the organisation continues to produce accessible resources on play, often in multiple languages. Revision of the *Ways to Play* booklet is particularly noteworthy given consistent reference to it by PlayBoard members and parents in the previous evaluation. Member cluster events and PlayBoard's Annual Conference represent a more 'personal' means of supporting members (and others), sharing information, enhancing understanding of new developments in the area, and thus building capacity. That the conferences are so well attended is testament to their perceived value - in 2013 there were 160 attendees on day one and 140 on day two (Conference Report: *Driving the Play Agenda*, PlayBoard, 2013: 7). In November 2015, the conference brought together over 100 delegates. Entitled 'Playing Out', it highlighted the importance of play for children's/young people's physical and mental health and wellbeing; reflected on the current policy environment for play; and considered the challenges and barriers restricting or preventing children's play.

PlayBoard member groups now have a dedicated 'keyworker', a contact with whom each member group can directly engage if they have queries or requests, responding to an issue noted by some members in the previous evaluation. As well as sharing information with their members, PlayBoard continues to harness the expertise and knowledge of its members in programme planning, to inform Playwork practice, advocacy messages and consultation responses.

The 2015 PlayBoard Membership Survey had a 21% response rate (representing 19 members). All considered that being a member added value to their organisation, and all would recommend being a member to others. Their main reasons for joining PlayBoard were to: access training and support opportunities (89%); network with others involved in play and playwork (79%); demonstrate support for children's right to play (68%); enhance organisational capacity (68%); gain access to play focused publications and resources (58%). The most common types of support accessed from PlayBoard over the previous 12 months were: general information, advice and guidance on play (95%); membership cluster meetings (89%); training (79%); E-Play newsletter (74%); PlayBoard website (74%). The main forms of support they anticipated requiring in the forthcoming 12 months were: training (100%), advice (95%) and information (84%), with fewer expecting to require support for research (42%) or advocacy (32%). Demonstrating the value of the support they currently received and their confidence in the expertise of PlayBoard, 95% indicated that they would be willing to pay for additional support on a 1:1 basis (*Overview of 2015 PlayBoard Member Survey*).

PlayBoard has developed a pilot project aimed at supporting 12 school age childcare member groups to better demonstrate the difference their organisations are making within their communities (September 2014 – September 2015). Identified as an ‘impact champion’ by the Building Changes Trust’s ‘Inspiring Impact NI Programme’, PlayBoard has organised workshops and provided direct support to help these 12 groups understand the cycle of impact; assess their own impact; access information about tools and resources for measuring impact – enhancing the capacity of the groups to evaluate the impact of their work. The project was launched at a seminar: ‘Measuring Impact for Sustainability’ (November 2014) attended by 60 people from the school age childcare sector, Belfast Health Trust, OFMDFM, the University of Ulster, Belfast Metropolitan College, and Northern Ireland Childcare Partnerships. Seminar evaluations noted the usefulness of information sharing and practical advice which emphasised ways of gathering children’s perspectives:

‘Very useful. Great way to share information about how to get ideas from the children in order to be more child-led. Interesting to see how this is achieved in other settings.’ (PlayBoard Project Update Report, September 2014 – February 2015: 3)

Following a shared planning session and one-to-one sessions, participants considered how to embed ‘impact’ practice within their organisations:

‘We got some very useful tips on how to improve our services, use the information to help us fundraise or access funding and look at the different types of evidence we should be collecting.’ (PlayBoard Project Update Report, September 2014 – February 2015: 7)

Demonstrating capacity building at various levels, this project highlights the value of PlayBoard sharing knowledge and skills in research/ consultation and experience of evidencing the impact of its practice to enhance the ability of members to advocate for play needs and rights through evidence-informed messages.

Presentations and Publications

Providing information to build and enhance understanding of play needs and rights goes beyond member groups and the child/ youth sectors. Opportunities were taken regularly to share key messages, research findings and examples of working practice in public, practitioner and academic forums. Over the course of the evaluation period this included presenting research findings and programme learning at: the PlayBoard Annual Conference; external conferences and seminars; showcasing events. It also included publishing articles in practitioner magazines,¹ publically-orientated research updates,² and academic texts.³

¹ Feature in *iP-DIP* No. 147 (April 2013) about the seminar ‘A Richer Understanding of Article 31 of the UNCRC’; piece in *iP-DIP* No.148 (May 2013) about responses to the ‘Playing Out or Playing Up?’ campaign

² O’Loughlin, J., Stevenson, B. and Schubotz, D. (2011) *Playscapes at 16*, Research Update No. 74, ARK; McQuade, L., Kehoe, S. and Emerson, L. (2015) *Are children getting the opportunities to realise their right to play?* Research Update No. 98, ARK

³ O’Loughlin, J. (2014) ‘Play Matters’ in D. Schubotz and P. Devine (eds), *Not so Different: Teenage attitudes across a decade of change in Northern Ireland*, Belfast: ARK

Interviewees also noted the usefulness of PlayBoard Conferences, typically attended by a diversity of delegates including: childcare providers, community organisations, youth work organisations, Council representatives, education providers, academics and departmental representatives:

'The Leisure Services Officer attends PlayBoard conferences, where there's a high quality of speakers ... I was at a conference about risk, which was good and well-attended.' (Council representative 1)

Reflecting on content and learning, the former Children's Commissioner commented:

'At PlayBoard's last conference the two Junior Ministers mentioned 'Bright Start' [Childcare Strategy]. The Young Researchers presented and parents were helped to think outside the box – some parents from Beechmount were thinking about the possibility of blocking the streets for 2 days/week so children can play outside safely.'

As recommended in the previous evaluation, the distribution of *E-Play* has been broadening beyond PlayBoard's member groups:

'Their newsletter is a good publication. I give it a quick scan, find out about best practice' (Council representative 1).

In 2013, over 350 organisations received *E-Play* on a monthly basis and it was estimated that an average of 100 people viewed each PlayBoard post on their Facebook page (*PlayBoard Annual Review, 2013: 11*). As of 16 March 2016, PlayBoard's Facebook page had 787 likes, and PlayBoard had 2,482 followers on Twitter.

Wide resource and information sharing, in addition to representation on regional bodies and partnership working, were identified as strengths of the organisation and means through which they were raising understanding about play needs and rights (Outcome 2):

'I think it's that combination of the resources they produce and also their very active presence in spaces where there's a potential to influence people – whether that's academics or policy makers or practitioners. You see their PlayBoard newsletter [E-Play], that list. It's not a list that goes out once in a while. I think I've had it 3 times today alone! So there's a very strong sense of letting people know what's happening. They're very proactive about their lists, and their events, and their participation in the broader child voluntary sector as well as other things which, I presume, are a lot more focused on play.' (Academic 2)

These methods ensure the reach of PlayBoard's messages is expansive - crossing sectors, disciplines and countries:

'PlayBoard ... can develop very creative projects and influence policy in the area of play. They are good at working across sectors, linking policy and practice. Sometimes being focused on one topic can stop other organisations from working on that topic. But PlayBoard is very good at drawing other organisations in.' (NICCY representative)

Their publications and presentations support PlayBoard's self-assessment as a driver of the play agenda, both in and beyond Northern Ireland:

'Materials they've taken to events have been picked up and found their way to other places through the IPA [International Play Association] network. Well-presented, colourful, accessible materials of the type produced by PlayBoard are valued by IPA members.' (President, IPA)

Workforce Development and Promotion of Playwork

Workforce development remains a key aspect of PlayBoard's work. This involves: delivering training programmes; running seminars to inform professionals and trainers about recent developments; producing information about Playwork qualifications and careers; advocating for the inclusion of Playwork in relevant course curriculums; and inputting into the design and delivery of external courses.

On behalf of SkillsActive (the UK sector skills body for Playwork), PlayBoard hosts the Playwork Education and Training Council for Northern Ireland (PETC.NI), which meets quarterly to discuss issues of strategic importance (such as qualifications, training and development for play workers), ensure implementation of the *UK Play and Playwork Education and Skills Strategy 2011-2016*, and advise on development of Playwork in Northern Ireland. Increasing access to Playwork training and qualifications, this will support provision of play opportunities for children and young people (Outcome 4) in the long-term while also continuing to strengthen understanding about the value of play for holistic development (Outcome 1) and enhancing the capacity of workers to articulate children's play needs and rights (Outcome 2) in the short term.

Demonstrating the scope and reach of PlayBoard's training, during 2013-2014 Playwork Training included: 'Reflective Practice' for 60 attendees; 'Outdoor Play' for 40 attendees; 'Behaviour Management' for 80 attendees; 'Inclusion' for 60 attendees; 'Understanding Play in School Age Childcare' for 20 social workers; 'Play for Parents' for 92 parents (PlayBoard *Annual Review*, 2014: 9). For school age childcare services, PlayBoard provided 'Improving Quality' training in 13 settings and 78 support visits (ibid). The benefits of training offered by PlayBoard were noted:

'We've trained summer scheme staff in play training, an idea which initially came from PlayBoard. That has improved the quality of experience of the children.' (Council representative 1)

In promoting the value of playwork, PlayBoard lobbied with, and on behalf of, play and childcare workers to have this recognised and embedded in policy on *Minimum Standards for Day Care and Childminding for Children Under 12* (DHSSPS). The impact of this lobbying is evidenced in the final document, which acknowledges Playwork as the most appropriate qualification for school age childcare settings (Outcome 3). The framing of this also clearly indicates an understanding of the value of play for holistic development (Outcome 1):

'This guidance endorses the principles underpinning playwork and recognises that children and young people's capacity for positive development will be

enhanced if given access to the broadest range of environments and play opportunities. These will be in the Play Policy of every setting.’⁴

A government official acknowledged PlayBoard’s role in ensuring implementation of this policy in practice:

‘[PlayBoard] promoted the playwork qualification as an ideal qualification. We look towards this as the qualification for people in our grant-aided child care settings.’ (OFMDFM Official 2)

The official also noted how PlayBoard directly supported school age childcare providers to submit applications for funding:

‘I’m aware of ... their role in promoting our grants for school age childcare. They talk through the process with prospective applicants, have identified gaps in applications and worked out the reasons why. If it’s lack of capacity, then they will work to support applications. They have been very proactive.’ (OFMDFM Official 2)

Affirming PlayBoard’s influence in the promotion of Playwork, one of PlayBoard’s Board of Directors stated:

‘Playwork is now a “known” in the children’s services sector and at Government level. The allocation of resources through Bright Start and the inclusion of Playwork in the Minimum Standards are two crucial examples of positions that would not be the case if PlayBoard had not built up the relationships with Government and children’s services and communicated the importance of play and playwork in these arenas.’

2.2 Case study: Cross-sectoral Working to Challenge Negative Images of Children and Play

In April 2013, the Policing and Community Safety Partnership (PCSP) launched its ‘Playing Out or Playing Up?’ campaign. This involved placing posters, with the image of a child posing aggressively, in public locations throughout the city (including on buses and bus shelters). The poster asked: ‘Playing out or playing up? Do you know where your child is?’ Concerned about the association of play with ‘trouble’ or ‘anti-social behaviour’, PlayBoard worked closely with partners in the voluntary sector to challenge this negative stereotype and have the posters removed.

Lobbying for this campaign was an example of the cross-organisational work in which PlayBoard is regularly involved. It demonstrated application of two recommendations made in the previous evaluation: that PlayBoard consider developing future work to challenge negative perceptions about young people; and that it develops and promotes opportunities for collaborative lobbying with other organisations. It also illustrates how the organisation has worked strategically to establish effective alliances and partnerships (a stated aim of Phase 2 of the Play

⁴ Health and Social Care Board (2013) *Childminding and Day Care for Children Under Age 12 Minimum Standards: Implementation Guide* (p.7) <http://www.early-years.org/misc-docs/mim-standards-implement.pdf>

Advocacy Programme). PlayBoard's role in challenging this campaign was acknowledged by a number of interviewees:

'Whenever we had the campaign 'Playing Up or Playing Out?' they were very active and vocal as part of the coalition that responded to that very negative media image.' (Academic 2)

'NICCY raised concern on a number of issues concerning negative perceptions about or representations of children and young people. We would have had a conversation with PlayBoard about what they were doing to make sure we were singing from the same hymn sheet – working together for the same aim.' (Former Children's Commissioner)

Working relationships maintained over time through membership of networks and forums ensured that child and youth organisations were able to articulate how the 'Playing Out or Playing Up?' campaign could negatively impact on children's right to play. Organisations that work to protect and promote the rights of children and young people pooled knowledge, resources and expertise to ensure a strong critical response to the campaign. With the Children's Commissioner and Directors of Include Youth and Children's Law Centre, PlayBoard's CEO contributed to local radio programmes, highlighting the negative connotations of young people and play. Letters were written to Belfast PCSP and Belfast City Council noting concerns. Central to this collective response was children's right to play and their experiences of social exclusion, reflecting concerns expressed in the 2008 Concluding Observations of the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child about intolerance and negative public attitudes towards children in the UK.

PlayBoard also demonstrated how this campaign affected the right to play more broadly through a range of outreach activities. An online petition was set up highlighting the negative stereotyping of the 'Playing Out or Playing Up?' campaign. This was circulated via PlayBoard's Facebook and Twitter accounts, demonstrating the value of multiple means of information sharing and the additional reach of online mechanisms.

PlayBoard shared learning from this process with the play sector more broadly through publishing an article about how the organisation had challenged the campaign.⁵ The sharing of such learning (a stated aim of Phase 2 of the Play Advocacy Programme) is likely to inform similar campaigns elsewhere.

2.3 Key Findings

- Dissemination of accessible resources and information, in addition to participation on regional bodies and successful partnership working, were identified as strengths of the organisation and effective means through which PlayBoard raises understanding about children's and young people's play needs and rights in both policy and practice.
- Sustained involvement in local networks and forums whose remit is broader than 'play' ensures that play is an element of the local advocacy agenda; increasing understanding about the importance of play for holistic development and

⁵ iP-DiP, 148. May 2013

strengthening the capacity of other participants to articulate play needs and rights.

- Sharing information about children's play needs and rights using a range of methods, including *E-Play* and social media, ensures the delivery of PlayBoard's key messages across sectors or disciplines within and beyond Northern Ireland.
- PlayBoard has developed consultative skills with children and has collated evidence that supports its advocacy messages and demonstrates impact. Sharing these skills with member groups and other organisations is another means of capacity building.
- PlayBoard has significant strategic and practical roles in workforce development and promotion of Playwork.
- PlayBoard has advanced cross-organisational working as an effective means of lobbying for children's right to play.
- Building capacity improves advocacy in terms of the range of those who can advocate, and the impact of the messages being delivered.

3. WORK WITH CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE

3.1 Overview of Work

PlayBoard's direct work with children and young people is varied, taking place in and through different forums, including schools and communities, and often linking more clearly to one outcome than others. In addition to 'supporting and providing play opportunities' (Outcome 4), PlayBoard regularly involves children and young people in research and consultations - either facilitating these themselves, or working with partners and membership organisations to promote the involvement of children and young people. In addition to the case study example, work with children and young people includes the following:

Direct Work in Schools and Communities

PlayBoard's direct practice in schools and communities is discussed in Sections 5 and 6. Concerned primarily with 'supporting/ enhancing opportunities for play' (Outcome 4), it also aims to 'strengthen understanding' among the groups involved in such programmes 'that play is important for children's development', and that children and young people are 'strong, competent social actors in and through their play' (Outcome 1).

Research

PlayBoard's Young Researchers Group has input into research at a range of levels - from being 'participants' sharing their views with other organisations conducting research, to being 'advisers' in development of a survey module and 'peer researchers' involved in the design of a research project, data collection, analysis and dissemination of findings.

In 2014, they were one of several groups represented in an Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) knowledge exchange project examining negative media representations of young people in Northern Ireland. The aims of this research were to raise awareness of the impacts of negative media representations and to inform development of resources for children, young people and the media regarding media engagement. The views of the Young Researchers Group were included with those of other participants in a summary of the research findings.⁶

The Group also acted as 'advisers' in the development of questions for a module about play in the 2014 Kids Life and Times (KLT) Survey for P7 children in Northern Ireland. One of the interviewees noted that, *'with the help of academic researchers, children can come up with questions and scales which are reliable'* (Academic 1). The Group was then involved in analysis of the module data. The resources involved in developing the capacity and skills necessary for this level of participation in research are acknowledged in the case study below. The aim of PlayBoard commissioning the questions in the survey was to gather children's views about their

⁶ Gordon, F., McAlister, S. and Scraton, P. (2015) *'Behind the Headlines'. Media Representation of Children and Young People in Northern Ireland: The voices and experiences of children and young people*, Belfast: Queen's University Belfast
(<http://www.law.qub.ac.uk/schools/SchoolofLaw/FileStore/Filetoupload,501440,en.pdf>)

opportunities to play in and outside school. The survey findings have been written up into a research briefing,⁷ which was widely circulated and is publically available. Such dissemination has 'strengthened understanding that children and young people are strong, competent social actors in and through their play; that they can effectively participate in decisions about their play; and that play is important for holistic development' (Outcome 1).

Consultation

The Young Researchers Group was perceived to be a useful source of information to inform government consultations: '*... using their Young Researchers Group, we can test things and get their opinions on policies*' (OFMDFM Official 3).

PlayBoard has also been commissioned by government departments to conduct consultations with children about specific policy issues, including the school starting age, the *Childcare Strategy* and in relation to the development of a play area in Crawfordsburn Country Park (see Section 6).

Discussing the school starting age consultation, an official identified PlayBoard's skill and expertise in facilitating workshops with young children:

'PlayBoard was identified as the body able to engage with children of this age-range ... They knew how to approach and capture children's thoughts and how to understand issues like the possible impacts of being summer born ... The questions they asked were presented in a way the children could engage with [using stories and play]. They showed that these things aren't impossible.' (DENI Official)

He emphasised the importance of PlayBoard's impartiality in this process:

'It was important that PlayBoard were not coming with pre-conceived ideas of their own in the consultation workshops; that they delivered these independently of their ideas on the subject.' (DENI Official)

PlayBoard's report explained the methodological approach adopted in addition to children's responses, using an accessible format which was a useful advocacy tool:

'The Report they produced was excellent ... The ways they got ideas across would be useful in terms of updating the Education Committee. That is to say that the issue was explained very simply and in a way that everyone could understand. Such a methodology is useful for MLAs, who have limited time to read material.' (DENI Official)

One of the Junior Ministers recognised the contribution PlayBoard makes to policy consultation through its participative approach:

'One of the areas that works very well ... is the participation of children and young people ... At the minute our draft Childcare Strategy is out for consultation and that is a big area of work that PlayBoard help us in, but

⁷ McQuade, L., Kehoe, S. and Emerson, L. (2015) *Are children getting the opportunities to realise their play?* Research Update No. 98. ARK (<http://www.ark.ac.uk/publications/updates/update98.pdf>)

particularly in terms of bringing children and young people together to give their views on it in a way that's not the usual type of consultation. So children's participation - they're very, very good at that in terms of any of our policy areas.' (Junior Minister, OFMDFM)

The Junior Minister emphasised the creative and meaningful processes adopted by PlayBoard during consultations:

'Obviously we have a duty to involve children and young people in any policies or strategies that we're bringing forward. And the way they did it at the weekend, it's an example of how their work with children and young people is caught ... because they had 4 different events going on in W5 [Science Museum] ... The way they did it was excellent, the way they made it relevant to the children's lives ... there were 60 kids at W5, and that was a Saturday.' (Junior Minister, OFMDFM)

PlayBoard's capacity to develop inclusive approaches involving children from different communities was also significant:

'We have responsibility for community relations ... and we would engage with PlayBoard again in terms of the implementation of some of those projects and those programmes that we have out there. They're very good at bringing children from all different backgrounds together in the one place. I would say probably more so than a lot of organisations that work with children and young people.' (Junior Minister, OFMDFM)

Describing the process of consultation with children in two primary schools close to Crawfordsburn Country Park about what they would like in a play area, an official stated:

'The project was described to local primary school children who discussed what they wanted and developed drawings of their own ideas without being overly-led. It was a fully open process. The children's ideas were then integrated into a coherent design.' (DoE Official)

These examples are evidence of the implementation of a recommendation from the previous evaluation: that PlayBoard continue to support government departments and others in their consultations with children and young people about decisions affecting their play needs and rights. It is less clear if the second part of that recommendation has been fully implemented – ensuring that children and young people receive feedback about their contributions and how these influenced decisions – although the official from DoE commented about the Crawfordsburn project: *'The plan is to invite the children involved in the consultation back to a launch of the play area.'*

3.2 Case Study: Using Youth Research as the Basis for Campaigning and Awareness-raising (General Comment No. 17 on UNCRC Article 31)

PlayBoard has facilitated a Young Researchers Group since 2013. At the time of the evaluation, the Young Researchers Group comprised ten children aged 8-12 years. The value of this group was noted in the previous evaluation report in that this is one of the few peer research groups in Northern Ireland involving younger children. The current evaluation confirms that this group provides a positive example of younger

children as ‘competent social actors’ who can be actively involved in decision making (Outcome 1). Speaking about the work of the Group and their presentation at a ‘Young Researchers in Northern Ireland’ ESRC Festival of Social Science event (November 2014), one of the event organisers and a specialist in participatory research explained:

‘People think “lay” researcher involvement, or “co-researcher” involvement, is OK. Not very many people would question that young people who are 16 have a certain insight and reflective look at life and their experiences and things like that. But it’s much more unusual to involve children of a very young age as co-researchers. They were giving one of the first presentations of the day, and it really fills a gap - it really helps our understanding in relation to how young children can be involved in that.’ (Academic 1)

This case study focuses primarily on one area of work engaged in by the Young Researchers Group during the evaluation period. It is evidence of application of two recommendations from the previous evaluation. First, that PlayBoard continue support to enable children and young people to articulate their play needs and advocate for realisation of their right to play. Second, that PlayBoard continue the development of practical resources for a range of purposes and for a variety of audiences. This case study demonstrates how children’s and young people’s voices were utilised to effectively lead on campaigning and awareness-raising about General Comment No. 17. It also demonstrates:

- how multiple outcomes can be achieved through one area of work. For example, working with children and young people to strengthen *their own* capacity to articulate their play needs and rights (Outcome 2) can strengthen others’ understanding of the value of play and of children/ young people as strong competent social actors (Outcome 1), enhance the capacity of others to articulate play needs and rights (Outcome 2), and contribute to greater strategic understanding and recognition of the importance of children’s and young people’s right to play across social policy (Outcome 3);
- how PlayBoard utilise one programme or activity for a range of purposes (using resources effectively to reach a wide audience);
- the value of grounding advocacy and influencing work in children’s and young people’s voices.

While closely inter-related, the various elements of this case study are presented separately.

Young People as Researchers

In February 2013, the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child adopted *General Comment No. 17: the right to rest, play and recreation and to participate in cultural and artistic activities*. PlayBoard supported its Young Researchers Group of ten 8-12 year olds to become peer researchers, learning in particular about their right to play. Exploring attitudes to play and the potential challenges they faced in enjoying their right to play enhanced their ‘capacity and ability to articulate children’s and young people’s play needs and rights’ (Outcome 2).

The group was supported to develop a questionnaire and to carry out face-to-face interviews with other children about these issues. A total of 111 children and young

people aged 4-17 years old from across Northern Ireland participated in this research. The findings were discussed by the Young Researchers Group, with support from an adult researcher, and common themes were identified. Through the work of this project the young researchers developed three resources: *'The Right to Play'* Report outlining the research findings and recommendations; an easy to understand version of General Comment No. 17; and a poster highlighting the challenges of making the right to play a reality for children in Northern Ireland.

A key element of this work with the Young Researchers Group was capacity building and skills development (an issue covered in more detail in the previous evaluation report). Importantly, demonstrating full participation and inclusion, the Group was involved in all aspects of this research project - formulation of the research idea, research design, data collection, data analysis and dissemination. Through their own capacity being enhanced, those involved contributed to the process of producing and disseminating information and resources aimed at strengthening others' understanding about children's play needs and rights (Outcome 2). The need for involving young people as researchers was explained by one of the group:

'I didn't realise that we are quite young compared to the other young researchers in Northern Ireland. There should be more children involved in research because we are the ones that know what the problems are in our own areas.' (Young Researcher, aged 9)

Young People Presenting Their Research

In addition to designing, carrying out, analysing, and using the research to inform resources, members of the Young Researchers Group were also involved in presenting their research findings in a range of forums, including at the PlayBoard Annual Conference and at the 'Young Researchers in Northern Ireland' showcasing event.

While increasing understanding of children's play needs and rights, being involved in these presentations demonstrated to diverse audiences that children should be viewed as 'strong competent social actors' who can 'participate in decisions about their play' (Outcome 1). The value of young people's voices in enhancing 'strategic understanding ... of the importance of children's right to play' (Outcome 3) was confirmed by the comments of the Junior Ministers at the PlayBoard Annual Conference:

'It is important to speak to children and young people, it is very important to hear their views and opinions because it is important to them in their lives.'

'We need a much greater awareness of the value of play. It is a vital ingredient in developing children - right through their transition into adulthood.'

The lasting impact of this was demonstrated in a reference by one of the Junior Ministers to the presentation by the Young Researcher's Group during a speech at another conference. She used this as an example of the importance of children and young people having a say in how decisions are made on the issues which impact on their lives.

While young people's presentations have significant impact, supporting their presentations requires commitment from staff. Enabling children to be involved in all

aspects of research requires expertise and resources to ensure that their participation is not tokenistic or partial. That members of the Group were involved in presentations demonstrates the sense of ownership that participatory research can engender. While the Young Researchers Group was not involved in the Phase 2 evaluation, a number of young people involved in carrying out research on issues important to them were interviewed in the previous evaluation. They noted the skills they had developed and how involvement in research had enhanced their desire and confidence to advocate on their own behalf. The impact of involvement in child/youth-led research in terms of enhancing the skills and ability of those involved 'to articulate children's and young people's play needs and rights' (Outcome 2) was recognised by the former Children's Commissioner:

'Young people have been involved as Young Researchers or in other projects – they will take ideas back to their communities. They also learn about their rights. Some stick with them more than others - the right to play, the right to an education, the right to have a say in decision-making - but the more we can do to help rights trip off the tongue, the better. And it's significant for parents too – rights are a tool they didn't realise they had when they are arguing the case for services for their children. For example, Article 31 in terms of play.' (Former Children's Commissioner)

Using Young People's Research to Influence Policy and Practice

While it is not always possible for children and young people themselves to present their research and subsequent resources, these have been used externally by PlayBoard to strengthen understanding of children's play needs and rights, and to advocate for the right to play. Thus, PlayBoard's influencing is grounded in children's voices. In this case, the research and resources designed and developed by the Young Researchers Group were used as the basis of PlayBoard's campaign to raise-awareness about General Comment No. 17.

Reflecting on the effectiveness of the process and outputs, a children's rights specialist noted:

'I think it was very ambitious and innovative of them really. Because there's a lot of talk internationally about General Comments having to be produced in a child-friendly format. But you don't see them, actually, when you go looking. So it was a really innovative piece of work that was thoughtful and well thought through. ... on the face of it, they were producing a child-friendly Comment which was for children. But actually they produced this really effective advocacy tool for policy makers. They kind of married those two things, didn't they? – informing children but bringing policy makers in.' (Academic 2)

In particular, the poster designed by young people was disseminated widely. It was displayed at the International Play Association Conference in Geneva at the launch of General Comment No. 17 attended by UN Committee members and representatives of play organisations from across the world (see Section 7). The poster, research Report and 'easy to understand' version of the General Comment were also disseminated at the local level to departmental officials and political representatives across political parties. These resources were sent to sectoral colleagues, community organisations, PlayBoard membership groups and schools

across Northern Ireland. Further advertising, dissemination and campaigning took place through social media (Twitter, Facebook, E-Play Newsletter).

At a range of conferences involving voluntary and community sector organisations, academics, young people, and international play organisations, PlayBoard staff also presented about the process undertaken by the Young Researchers Group. For example, in addition to presenting the journey of the young researchers and the findings of their work at the International Play Association Conference, they discussed how the work was being used to impact at a political and policy level. Such presentations are important not only for affirming that children and young people are 'strong competent social actors' who can 'articulate their play needs and rights' (Outcomes 1 and 2), but also for sharing learning and models of practice that are child/ young people centred (a stated aim of Phase 2 of the Play Advocacy Programme). As observed by an academic specialist in children's rights:

'I think that PlayBoard's involvement [in seminars] with other Atlantic Philanthropies grant holders indicates that they are very good at being open to the value of learning from other people's experiences and very committed to sharing what they've learnt. Mostly that's been around their child participation work for the General Comment, but not exclusively.' (Academic 2)

The work of the Young Researchers Group as an example of child-centred and child-led research has also been promoted by others. For example, academics at Queen's University Belfast have used this example in their teaching:

'I teach research methods so ... it would be about ... why you may want to involve "lay people" in research and the advantages of that. Of course, we teach about children's rights and the UNCRC and how that impacts on research with children and young people, and how they should be involved. It's going beyond "voices" as such. It's more about the epistemological reasons why it might be a good idea to involve them – having access to their experiences to inform our understanding of their needs.' (Academic 1)

There is little doubt that the resources produced by the Young Researchers Group were well utilised and formed the basis of PlayBoard's efforts to raise awareness and support for General Comment No. 17. That the campaign was grounded in children and young people's ideas, concerns, research and resources is commendable. Further, this work successfully raised understanding about the value of play 'for holistic development' (Outcome 1), enhanced the 'capacity of key stakeholders to articulate children's play needs and rights' (Outcome 2) and influenced 'understanding ... of the importance of the right to play' at a policy level (Outcome 3).

3.3 Key Findings

- PlayBoard has developed skills and expertise in facilitating consultation workshops with young children. This expertise is recognised by government departments and is an important element of PlayBoard's advocacy work.
- PlayBoard's expertise includes: retaining impartiality and being open to children's ideas or suggestions; using creative methods to gather and present children's

views; making the process meaningful and relevant to children's lives; bringing children together from different backgrounds.

- The Young Researchers Group is one of the few peer research groups in Northern Ireland involving younger children. Their research about children's right to play and the resources they have developed provide an excellent example of how children's and young people's voices can be utilised effectively in campaigns and awareness-raising.
- Supporting children and young people to develop the skills required to be involved in all aspects of the research process requires staff expertise and resources to ensure that their participation is not tokenistic or partial.
- The work of the Young Researchers Group demonstrates the successful involvement of children as 'co'-researchers, and emphasises the importance of children's views to understanding about their needs, experiences and suggestions for change.
- Strengthening the capacity of children and young people as advocates remains central to PlayBoard's work. While resource intensive, the value of this approach is clear – both for the children/young people themselves and in influencing others.
- This evaluation confirms the impact of children's and young people's voices in influencing policy makers and practitioners.
- Sharing learning about the process of grounding campaigning and lobbying in child and youth research will encourage and inform the adoption of this approach by other organisations.
- 'Child-friendly' documents, including those produced by the Young Researchers Group and summaries of research/ consultation findings, are effective advocacy tools for (adult) policy makers.
- Developing one resource for a range of purposes is effective and efficient.

4. WORK WITH SCHOOLS

4.1 Overview of Work

Much of PlayBoard's work in schools has been delivered under the umbrella of the *Spaces to Be – Mapping Identity and Belonging Toolkit*, implicitly contributing to: 'strengthening understanding about the importance of play for children's holistic development' (Outcome 1), and 'enhancing opportunities for play' in the community (Outcome 4). The scope of the work in schools responds to a recommendation made in the previous evaluation: developing play in schools. Given their centrality within communities, schools provide a useful means through which to inform families and community members about the value of play and involve them in developing play opportunities.

'My Spaces - Positive Play' Initiative

Through its Good Relations Strategy, in 2011 the [then] Schools and Participation Officer within Derry City Council's Sports Development department tendered for the development and implementation of a 'Positive Play' initiative. PlayBoard's tender was successful and, between April 2011 and March 2014, the 'My Spaces - Positive Play' programme was delivered to 545 children aged 9-12 in twenty single-identity primary schools and one special school within the Council area. Based on PlayBoard's *Spaces to Be – Mapping Identity and Belonging Toolkit*, during the six-week programme classroom and outdoor playground sessions were used to provide training for teachers, playground supervisors and other relevant staff as well as activities for children.

Demonstrating obvious delight in the play opportunities provided by this initiative (Outcome 4), one child wrote:

'It was awesome!!! ... Every Tuesday I couldn't wait until I got to school (and it's not often I do that). So I must say I enjoyed it very much! THANK YOU FOR MAKING IT SO FUN!!!!' (P5 Pupil)

Appreciation of the imaginative stimulus provided by the sessions (Outcome 1: the importance of play for children's holistic development) was evident in the following quote:

'From "found material" to fantasy flings of fancy: PlayBoard provides the all-important "stuff" needed to create the Cosmic bang of chaos needed to build new galaxies, whilst the children's creativity and imagination create a myriad of worlds to fill them ... If teachers are willing to cast aside the shackles of planning, organisation and a knitted brow (just for a while), the learning outcomes that can be achieved are kaleidoscopic. If PlayBoard were a ship, you would be a fool not to sail in it. Simply jump on, shout "all aboard!" with your ship of fools and let your class lead you into adventures unknown.' (P4 Class Teacher)

For the Council officer who commissioned the programme, it *'addressed the soft but hard-hitting messages'* that it is *'hard for Sports Development to deliver'*:

'The soft outcomes are team working, playing football matches in shared space. The harder messages are that sport and physical activities are a good vehicle to do this. The 'Positive Play' Programme fitted well with identified need – children not knowing how to negotiate relationships, get on with each other, accept other people, be tolerant, know how to play.' (Commissioner of the 'My Spaces - Positive Play' Initiative, Derry City Council)

Also articulating 'the importance of play for holistic development' (Outcome 1), she described how the activities enabled children to develop important personal and social, as well as physical, skills:

'A very positive aspect was creativity for kids. They felt free to go and do, for example, loose parts using different materials. They were allowed the freedom to do this. Sports development is usually very structured – 25 children split into 4 lines ... to develop the skills for agility, balance, co-ordination. But, before they reach that stage, it is important for them to be able to use their imagination, be creative and feel comfortable working with others.' (Commissioner of the 'My Spaces - Positive Play' Initiative, Derry City Council)

The creative activities influenced teachers' perceptions about play, contributing to achievement of other elements of Outcome 1 by 'strengthening understanding that children and young people are strong, competent social actors in and through their play, and that they can effectively participate in decisions about their play':

'Teachers are generally used to instructing within the classroom setting and being in control of the classroom environment. Within the context of play, this programme focused on the contrary - where children are the leaders and in control of their own environment. At the beginning of the programme this culture shift took some teachers a while to get used to, but it made teachers contextualise play differently and gave them a different perspective.' (Commissioner of the 'My Spaces - Positive Play' Initiative, Derry City Council)

A longer-term legacy of the 'My Spaces - Positive Play' initiative has included the introduction of 'Play Leaders' in primary schools and 'Sports Leaders' in high schools:

'Like the PlayBoard buddy programme, this has been about training P7s to be Play Leaders in the playground and secondary school pupils getting a Sports Leader qualification and then going into primary schools to work with primary children. We've also set up 'energy clubs' – half hour clubs where schools train playground supervisors and teachers to run clubs at lunchtime or during breakfast/ afternoon clubs. Play Leaders are involved in these clubs.' (Commissioner of the 'My Spaces - Positive Play' Initiative, Derry City Council)

‘Spaces to Be’

Between January 2013 and March 2015 the ‘Spaces to Be’ Programme, also based on PlayBoard’s *Spaces to Be Toolkit*, was delivered to children in two primary schools located at interfaces or communities where spaces are contested in East Belfast and two primary schools in Newtownstewart. A total of 246 children participated from the four schools. Supporting the ‘Personal Development and Mutual Understanding’ element of the statutory curriculum, this programme initially brought together P5 children, followed by P5 and P6 children, and finally P5, P6 and P7 children to play, have fun and build relationships while exploring their identities through activities such as art, writing and drama. Cross-community play days were organised in each location, involving 71 parents from the Newtownstewart and East Belfast areas (PlayBoard *Contested Space/ Interface Monitoring and Evaluation System*, 2015: 7-8).

Asked during interviews about perceived benefits of the programme, Principal 1 clearly valued how the programme provided opportunities for children who had attended an integrated playgroup before going to separate Catholic and Protestant primary schools to *‘re-kindle old contacts’*:

‘It worked very well. There were strong bonds at the end, especially for the P5 children. When they got to P7 they were talking about sitting together with the children from [the other school] on the bus going to secondary schools. The whole aim was to get them working together and they co-operated well. It really paid off.’ (Primary School Principal 1, ‘Spaces to Be’ Programme)

Principal 2 also appreciated the ‘cross-community’ relationships fostered by the programme:

‘Newtownstewart doesn’t really have much other opportunity for children to mix outside of school. It was great to see the interaction that took place between them. When children bumped into each other outside the PlayBoard scheme, they knew each other’s names and had great conversations.’ (Primary School Principal 2, ‘Spaces to Be’ Programme)

A P5 child commented: *“It’s really great. We’ve really found our friends that we haven’t been able to see in, like, 5 years”*.

Responding to an interview question about the impact of the programme on other areas of the curriculum, Principal 2 considered that it had ‘humanised’ study of other religions:

‘In P7 Religion we talk about other religions and when talking about the Protestant faiths it puts a human face on what you’re talking about – the children that live or go to school on the other side of town.’

Principal 1 described the skill of PlayBoard staff in prompting interaction and discussion about potentially contentious events or practices:

'The children played together and the PlayBoard facilitators dealt with issues in very sensitive ways. They started with 'Ourselves' and 'Our Families', and then they built it up to 'Other people and communities'. In P7 they [children from both schools] were actually sharing their experiences and talking about things like the plantation of Ulster, the sacraments in different churches: "Oh, we don't do that". They were interested, as opposed to being defensive or offence being taken. Discussion of topics evolved ... In ... class, the children were talking about things that wouldn't have come up without the programme ... The facilitators skilfully used teaching points – promoting co-operation, sharing, etc. and the idea that we're all individuals but have a lot in common. There were relentless messages, which they didn't miss an opportunity to put across!'

However, interviews indicated that the intended outcomes of the Play Advocacy Programme had not been explicitly articulated during implementation of the 'Spaces to Be' Programme. For example, while recognising the importance of play as a vehicle for promoting cross-community interaction, one of the Principals questioned the educational value of play:

'I think, and talking to other staff, we accept that in this situation play was a necessary element of it – to get the children together. You could see the value of play in that. Outside of the scheme – in the school playground, at the Foundation Stage, we have 'Golden Time' in class and free time to play – play is like a reward. I'm not sure I see an educational value in it. Obviously, it promotes co-operation and things like that. I seem to be contradicting myself here!' (Primary School Principal 2, 'Spaces to Be' Programme)

Noting that involvement in the programme was *'a big time commitment – two and a half hours a week'*, the perceived benefits identified by Principal 1 included *'getting the opportunity to do things that would have been tricky for us to cover'*. Commenting that *'they could get involved with more creative possibilities'*, an example was: *'In the bigger play events with parents, they involved musicians, face paintings, dancing, singing... - things we can't do in school'*. A second benefit was that *'the resources from the programme we have and will use'*. Providing ideas for staff to incorporate into their own work was another significant impact:

'They were very good at bringing in and using junk to do creative things. We've continued with that ... The children were very busy in a very constructive way all the time they were involved in the programme sessions. What staff observed, they could use with all the children in school on a daily basis. Three quarters of the staff participated in the programme. It hit most of the staff. And they're chatting over, or picking up on, ideas in the staff room.' (Primary School Principal 1, 'Spaces to Be' Programme)

For Principal 2, the main benefit of the programme was *'Interaction between children of different faiths'*.

Describing attempts to *'involve parents through play days outside school and during the summer ... so that the programme went beyond individual children'*, Principal 1 commented that *'an enthusiastic core' of parents had 'worked well together'*,

although an issue identified by both Principals was organisation of these events during the day, *‘so it wasn’t practical for many to attend every session’*.

Illustrating how PlayBoard’s involvement can provide the catalyst for further community development activities, and thus sustainability, Principal 1 explained that the two schools were planning to organise events in a local cluster: *‘we’re hoping to take that core of parents and build on that’*. Principal 2 stated: *‘We have definitely talked about coming together. For example, arranging joint football tournaments – we hope to do that later in the year.’*

Successful delivery of the programme also increased interest in other PlayBoard activities for Principal 1, who stated that the school planned to take up PlayBoard’s offer of staff training about playground activities later in the year: *‘When we have the funding we’ll have PlayBoard back - they are the experts – to give us the inspiration and get us going’*.

Evaluations completed by children, school staff and parents highlighted the positive impacts of this programme in terms of supporting development of cross-community friendships, exploring issues of identity and belonging, understanding commonality while appreciating diversity, and contributing to development of shared communities, using a play based approach (PlayBoard *Contested Space/ Interface Monitoring and Evaluation System*, 2015: 30-49).

4.2 Case Study: ‘Positive Playgrounds’

The six-week ‘Positive Playgrounds’ programme was intended to help schools make the best use of available space during playtimes to promote positive outdoor play and learning opportunities that were fun and stimulating. However, an initial focus on ‘strengthening understanding that children and young people are strong, competent social actors in and through their play; that they can effectively participate in decisions about their play; and that play is important for holistic development’ (Outcome 1) was required before ‘enhancing opportunities for play’ (Outcome 4) could be successfully achieved.

PlayBoard Board of Directors noted that:

‘In education, the idea of children taking responsibility, gaining their needs, is not one teachers have ... teachers have a different concept of play ... Over the last ten to fifteen years, schools have been more open to PlayBoard coming up with ideas about how they can open up their playgrounds. They have sought advice about the time children spend in the playground, thought more about how learning inside the classroom and outside on the playground contributes to children’s development.’

Aimed at the adults supervising school playgrounds (teachers, classroom assistants, playtime supervisors), ‘Positive Playgrounds’ was delivered to 250 primary schools between September 2012 and May 2015. It focused on supporting schools re-examine their use of playgrounds and encouraging them to value these as important spaces within the school estate. In addition to developing strategies for encouraging physical play and social development, the programme explored play theory, play

types, playground policy and ideas for co-operative games. PlayBoard has also offered 'add-on' programmes catering for the needs of individual schools. These include: Positive Outdoor Play Training, Games Session for Staff and Parents, Games Session for Children, 'Join the Squad' guide about forming a Playground Squad or Playground Buddies scheme, Play for Parents, Rainy Day Indoors, Playground Audit, and Positive Playgrounds Revisited (PlayBoard *Positive Playgrounds Training Newsletter*, May 2015). PlayBoard's Board of Directors noted that the 'Positive Playgrounds' Programme *'has certainly had an impact in the education sector. Demand is growing, which is a sign of quality.'*

Recognising the impact of this initiative on perceptions about play, the former Children's Commissioner commented:

'Schools are viewing play differently. PlayBoard's work on playgrounds has helped them consider the importance of play in reducing obesity, promoting mental health and well-being, contributing to children's development and life skills such as team-building and so on.'

In an interview, one Principal explained the catalyst underpinning his school's interest in the 'Positive Playgrounds' initiative:

'The lunchtime supervisors came to me saying that they had an issue. They weren't enjoying playtime with the children. I invested £1,000 to bring in PlayBoard. I took seriously the issue the supervisors came with. That gave me momentum as a school leader – I addressed the issue and provided a potential solution. That meant I could ask them to engage.'

He described the process, from an initial needs assessment to staff training and then the setting up of playground activities:

'One of the PlayBoard Officers came in and carried out a needs assessment on play. Our play wasn't very rich – we had kids with balls, running about. They did a survey, which led to training looking at how we could create and develop play in the playground ... It was over 2 days. The first day was for non-teaching staff (lunchtime supervisors, classroom assistants) - looking at theories of play. The second was playing games and learning about play as a staff. A small team of teaching and non-teaching staff took it forward. They had ownership of the process. They spent a lot of time researching different activities, sending out lists of resources to parents – we had lorry-loads of tyres, palettes... dropped off. Everyone took responsibility for a [play] station.'

The Principal described the children's enjoyment of their new play opportunities (Outcome 4), as well as developmental benefits (Outcome 1):

"Now we have dressing up, a music station, lego, tyres, den-building. When you watch the children play now it's pleasurable ... The end result is that the children are saying things like "This is the best thing ever". Just today, the children had taken equipment and created a truck – they wanted me to take photos to record it. And a girl was in the dressing up area, pretending to be a granny ... When you look at the language they're using, it's all very positive.'

Clearly identifying children as 'strong, competent social actors in and through their play, who can effectively participate in decisions about their play' (Outcome 1), the Principal stated: *'The kids are helping to run it.'*

Asked whether involvement in this initiative had changed perceptions about play among school staff, he commented:

'It has brought play back. For example, having the dressing up box – you wouldn't believe the number of boys dressing up as a young lady! The kids are playing with den-building. It's giving kids the chance to play again.'

This was in contrast to other social and educational expectations: *'We expect kids to grow up. In education, we are influenced by the Grammar school system...'* The Principal added, *'I was blown away with the number of different types of play. It's so much better – embedded.'*

He also noted benefits in relation to staff 'management' of children's behaviour during playtimes:

'There's no management, whether they're playing football or at the music station, because they are engaged in what they're doing. It makes lunch time easier.'

Identifying how practical changes had led to significant improvements in playground dynamics, he explained:

'Nine times out of ten, behavioural issues come from the playground. We've been operating this from Easter to September and there have been less behaviour problems because they have something new. When they are bored, that's when you get more challenging behaviour. Now we've looked at how we establish boundaries (where children can play with a ball, use skipping ropes). We have different areas for different types of play – building dens, a dinosaur pit, etc. The level of intervention diminishes. Lunchtime supervisors have more of an "overlooking" role. They can find themselves skipping with the children, joining in, having more conversation. Staff are enjoying going out onto the playground.'

The initiative prompted changes in the structure of the day, which had unanticipated positive impacts on working relationships between staff:

'We had to change our playtimes. There were some grumbles about that – "I'm not going to see so-and-so". But we gave it a shot. We have mixed teaching and non-teaching cultures because we have different playtimes – that's led to different mixes of staff, more relationships, more opportunities to chat.'

The Principal noted how the initial process 'has carried on':

'So now we're thinking about how to diversify through the winter. We're developing a winter schedule of activities, a timetable which will be put in place after half term when the weather changes.'

On the basis of this work, the school explored opportunities for extra funding and accreditation with PlayBoard:

'We have a bid in with PlayBoard to the Big Lottery for £10,000 to develop further. And we're talking to them about some kind of accreditation for the school - for the type of play we have.'

School staff had written an article about their experience for PlayBoard's Newsletter. This boosted morale and led to contact from other schools about the 'Positive Playgrounds' initiative and its benefits.

4.3 Key Findings

- PlayBoard's work in schools endorses the value of play in achieving positive outcomes (promoting physical health and emotional well-being; enhancing personal and social development; promoting social inclusion; reinforcing positive behaviours; addressing sensitive topics).
- The 'My Spaces - Positive Play' initiative addressed identified need, enabling children to develop important personal and social skills while using their imaginations, being creative and feeling comfortable working with others. It influenced teachers' perceptions about play, particularly the importance of creative 'free' play and opportunities for risk-taking.
- The 'Spaces to Be' Programme used play to promote 'cross-community' interaction. In addition to 'humanising' study of other religions, the programme prompted interaction and discussion about potentially contentious events or practices through exploration of identity and belonging. Facilitated discussion increased understanding of commonality while encouraging children to appreciate diversity.
- The 'Positive Playgrounds' Programme enabled school staff to consider the importance of play for children's personal/ social development, establishing an ethos which encouraged creativity, co-operation and independence. Benefits included: more emphasis on play which was enjoyable and fun for children; embedding access to different types of play; fewer behavioural problems during playtimes and therefore less intervention by teachers and playground supervisors. A relatively small investment led to significant changes in playtime experiences for both children and staff.
- Involvement in PlayBoard programmes provided the catalyst for further activities in participating schools.
- Successful delivery of a programme increased school's interest in other PlayBoard activities, such as training for staff about playground activities.
- Successful involvement in the 'Positive Playgrounds' initiative provided the stimulus for one school to submit an application to the Big Lottery for additional playground equipment and to discuss with PlayBoard the possibility of accreditation in recognition of the types of play established.

- Encouraging school staff to write about their experience of involvement in a programme for PlayBoard's *E-Play* Newsletter not only boosted their morale but also raised the profile of PlayBoard's work and its benefits with other schools.
- PlayBoard effectively used the same resource - *Spaces to Be: Mapping Identity and Belonging Toolkit* - with different audiences.
- PlayBoard successfully evidenced how play can provide a stimulus for promoting community relations using the *Spaces to Be – Mapping Identity and Belonging Toolkit*. This resource would provide the basis for designing programmes for schools which are responsive to the local context in a range of localities.

5. WORK IN COMMUNITIES AND WITH COUNCILS

5.1 Overview of Work

Much of PlayBoard's community-based work focuses on promoting, providing or 'supporting play opportunities' (Outcome 4). It is recognised, however, that to achieve this and ensure long-term impact, work is necessary to: 'strengthen understanding that children and young people are strong, competent social actors in and through their play; that they can effectively participate in decisions about their play; that play is important for holistic development' (Outcome 1); and to 'strengthen the capacity and ability of key stakeholders to articulate children's and young people's play needs and rights' (Outcome 2).

PlayBoard's Board of Directors stated that the organisation's '*core business is training and support for groups on the ground*', noting that '*this will help to increase the quality of children's experiences.*' Recognising the importance and potential outcomes of capacity building with communities, one Board member commented:

'The issue is, how are these projects sustained when PlayBoard is no longer involved? It's about creating pressure points in the community to ensure that projects get oxygen – encouraging community members to submit funding bids, badger their MLAs, etc.'

While further work may be required to achieve this objective, capacity building and partnership working are areas of work in which PlayBoard has continued to invest throughout Phase 2 of the Play Advocacy Programme (see Section 2). As discussed in the case study below, intensive work with Councils has aimed to expand play opportunities, not only in the short term but also in the longer term, through knowledge and skills development, and increased understanding about the importance of play for holistic development. Establishing and supporting community-Council partnerships is an area of work that has developed considerably since the previous evaluation.

Community Advocacy

In addition to community-Council partnerships, PlayBoard has worked with and supported communities in several ways. It provides support for parents through school age childcare provision, specific programmes and information provided on the PlayBoard website:

'PlayBoard are involved in after schools provision and they try to involve parents as much as possible – involving them in the programmes and the projects ... They just maybe need a bit of guidance, a bit of support. And I think PlayBoard is one of the key organisations that provide that for them.'
(Junior Minister, OFMDFM)

Individual residents, parents and community groups across Northern Ireland contact PlayBoard for advice about a range of play-related issues. This has included: advice on planning and housing developments in residential areas; making a case to the Council for a local play area; engaging with children and young people regarding 'anti-social behaviour' in designated play and leisure areas; providing informal and formal play opportunities in local areas. In each instance PlayBoard provides

advocacy support - meeting individuals or groups, providing details about accessing and lobbying local councillors or challenging planning decisions, and/or referring them to organisations for legal advice and support (e.g. NICCY, Children's Law Centre).

One Council representative commented: *'Community planning is the driver of everything'* and another that *'Community planning may be a big opportunity moving forward'*. PlayBoard's Board of Directors suggested that *'Emphasis on the involvement of children and young people in community planning processes will mean that play feeds into these.'*

Given its knowledge, connections and expertise, PlayBoard has carried out community audits and made enquiries to support community lobbying. In one community, PlayBoard completed a demographic analysis and produced a paper for the group in advance of a presentation to the Council. This presented the need for play provision within the area, and subsequently the Council agreed to develop provision (Outcome 4).

PlayBoard also supported a Tralee-based Regeneration Group to address lack of play opportunities in the local regeneration area. This involved a site visit, delivering a presentation to the Community Participation Task Group, and meeting the stakeholder group of statutory partners and community representatives involved in the regeneration project to discuss how play opportunities could be better integrated into the mainly urban landscape and to consider potential play developments. A report contextualised children's play in relation to the UNCRC, particularly Article 31, and relevant Republic of Ireland policy (thus contributing to Outcomes 1 and 2). To progress these debates, PlayBoard agreed to provide further background information and review the area plan to identify possible locations for different forms of play (Outcome 4). This demonstrated the potential for development of all-Ireland play advocacy work.

PlayBoard's contacts and relationships with Councils facilitated advocacy work at the local level and, in most cases, community concerns were resolved. Importantly, rather than taking sole responsibility, PlayBoard worked collaboratively alongside community representatives. In addition to 'enhancing play opportunities' (Outcome 4) these interventions increased understanding among community members about the 'importance of play for holistic development' (Outcome 1) and 'strengthened the capacity' of local residents and community groups 'to articulate children's and young people's play needs and rights' (Outcome 2).

Annual Play Days

Through providing training to volunteers in local communities and at the Annual Play Day, PlayBoard has worked to 'strengthen understanding that children and young people are strong, competent social actors in and through their play; that they can effectively participate in decisions about their play; and that play is important for holistic development' (Outcome 1), with a view to 'enhancing opportunities for play' (Outcome 4). The impact of this training is evidenced in the case study below.

As discussed in the previous evaluation report, PlayBoard's Annual Play Day events provide an opportunity for member groups, community organisations, children, young people, parents/ carers, and Council representatives to increase their understanding

about the value of play (Outcome 1) and learn skills that may enhance play opportunities (Outcome 4).

PlayBoard's Annual Play Day was recognised by a range of interviewees:

'I would have known about PlayBoard's 'Play Days' – engaging with other partners and developing opportunities for play in communities.' (Former Children's Commissioner).

'We don't get involved in non-fixed play programmes, although we are involved in the Play Day event on 3rd August throughout the Council'. (Council representative 1)

Observing the impacts of the Play Day and other direct work in communities, a member of PlayBoard's Board of Directors stated:

'At PlayBoard Annual Play Days young people were taught different skills, they thought outside the box. I saw Play Rangers in communities – changing how children used spaces, based on their ideas (e.g. using hay bales to create a wrestling ring). These ideas don't always cost a lot'.

The Junior Minister noted the value of promoting play through programmes such as Reclaiming the Streets, stating it brought the community together with minimal expenditure:

'that programme ... to try and get them involved in skips and ... hopscotch, street games ... The other good thing of it too was, it didn't cost much. If you had a tin there for hopscotch and a bit of chalk, that was you.'

Participants in the 'CAN Play' Play Leader Training also recognised that play is not necessarily an expensive activity:

'... it has been useful to recognise that children want to play with whatever is available to them and they enjoy using their imagination – just like we did as kids.'

'Using resources that we have in an alternative way, also using resources and materials that are recycled and don't cost much' (PlayBoard CAN Peace Partnership III Final Report Form, 2014: 15-16).

One of PlayBoard's Board of Directors noted that:

'Corporate organisations are seeking to provide funding to benefit local charities ... we need to ... leverage funding from these types of initiatives.'

Further, 'despite the agenda being dominated by "affordability"', the Board of Directors argued that 'it needs to be seen as an investment in terms of health and so on.'

ABC (Armagh, Banbridge, Craigavon)

PlayBoard's work with Councils was primarily intended to 'enhance opportunities for play' (Outcome 4). However, it has also influenced the perceptions of those involved about children and young people as 'strong, competent social actors in and through their play' and reinforced understanding that 'play is important for holistic development' (Outcome 1) as well as contributing towards 'strengthening the capacity and ability of key stakeholders to articulate children's and young people's play needs and rights' (Outcome 2).

PlayBoard has been involved in developing a three-year Play Strategy (2015-2018): *Putting Play at the Heart of the Community* for the new Armagh, Banbridge and Craigavon 'super-Council' and aims to establish this as a model for adoption by other Councils:

'ABC was 3 Councils, all with their own ways of working. It's about sorting out the logistics of operating as a large Council. The idea is that, as ABC is one of the biggest new Councils, if they develop a way of working this could be rolled out into the other 10 Councils.' (Council representative 1)

PlayBoard has received positive feedback from senior managers within the new Council, indicating support for an extended conceptualisation of play provision and more innovative approaches - including incorporation of street play, urban play landscaping, and development of a cohort of play volunteers (contributing to achievements of both Outcome 1 and Outcome 4). Meetings with senior officials led to a refining of the draft Play Strategy alongside discussion about how this would be incorporated into the wider strategic framework of the Council and included as part of the community planning process.

However, an interviewed Council representative described the difficulties involved in clarifying the roles and responsibilities of diverse groups (councillors, pre-school groups, education, youth service, police, community and voluntary sector organisations, residents associations) within the newly established Council. He described the process of 'driving the Play Strategy forward' as 'political – we don't want to fall out with anyone!' Suggesting that some services 'don't recognise their role in play and don't want to be round the table', he maintained that they were reluctant to commit staff to new initiatives. In his opinion, for change to happen, 'You need someone championing play':

'There's no Designated Officer at the moment. You need resources to be re-designated, for the Council to see this as a valuable role alongside the maintenance of play parks in terms of insurance and so on. The Council has no idea of the value of play. We need to bring the community on board, lobby for a Play Officer, increase the emphasis on championing play.' (Council representative 1)

The appointment of Play Development Officers to ensure 'mainstreaming' of community-based play and advocacy work was recommended by the previous evaluation. Recognising the potential for new developments in local country parks and forest areas, the Council representative suggested that 'quality assurance' was an issue which might also be addressed by the appointment of a play worker: 'You don't need someone there 365 days a year but you could have a Play Development

Worker who provides training, develops relationships and so on.’ Given that ‘Leisure’ and ‘Community’ are now linked, ‘there’s a good connection between the two areas’ and ‘having a Play Officer on the ground to make play part of the picture of “Leisure and Community” would be a real opportunity’ (Council representative 1).

Research and Play Needs Analysis for Councils

In terms of ‘strengthening capacity and ability ... to articulate children’s play needs and rights’ (Outcome 2), a challenge is that, for Councillors, *‘play parks are a big trophy ... which it’s hard to say “No” to’*. A Council representative stated that, in an effort *‘to tone down their [Councillors’] emphasis on creating fixed play parks’*, PlayBoard’s role has been *‘helping them think about how they make decisions’* based on *‘quality, the needs of the area, demographics’* by conducting consultations at a local level (Council representative 1).

Throughout 2013, for Banbridge District Council PlayBoard conducted community consultations and developed recommendations for meeting play needs in three areas. In Gilford and Leitrim, funding was secured to meet play needs based on the consultation findings and recommendations. In Edenderry, where consultation highlighted concerns about proposed locations for play, plans were delayed pending site identification.

In April 2012, a play area review was conducted for Newtownards Borough Council to identify an optimum location for the development of a play area within the Scrabo Estate, Newtownards, and to provide guidance about relocation of play equipment to the play area at Dixon Park, Ballygawley. A Geographical Information System was used to map demographic patterns, identify potential areas of play need and areas of play deficiency in Comber and Lisbane for Newtownards Borough Council (September 2013). The Council used this information to inform decisions about future investment in both areas. A similar review was conducted in the Bangor area for North Down Borough Council (September 2013). Consequently, the Council agreed to release funding to meet play deficits and liaised further with PlayBoard about potential play developments. A play area review based on analysis of local demographics, plus design and analysis of a community consultation were completed for Ards Borough Council (November 2013).

PlayBoard has been a member of the Newry and Mourne District Council ‘Children and Young People’s Strategic Forum’, engaged in developing a cross-sectoral strategic plan to enhance support for children and young people. The Board of Directors described how

‘PlayBoard was consulted about plans for Slievegullion Park. This led to engagement with children and young people and the setting up of a participation group. The original plans were substantially changed so that the play areas fit with the natural environment and links have been made with the Forestry Commission.’

The establishment and maintenance of positive relationships with Councils has enabled PlayBoard to provide practical advice and support to ‘enhance play opportunities’ (Outcome 4) in various Council areas. This process has contributed to

increased understanding about the value of play beyond fixed play parks, supporting and ‘strengthening the capacity’ of Council Officers and their partners ‘to articulate children’s and young people’s play needs and rights’ (Outcome 2).

5.2 Case Study: ‘CAN Play’ Programme

‘CAN Play’ Activity Programme

The ‘CAN Play’ Activity Programme, promoting free play in shared spaces through Peace III Partnership funding, was delivered in Carrickfergus, Antrim and Newtownabbey Councils between April 2012 and October 2013. Using a Playwork approach, it provided outdoor play sessions to encourage and enable play in:

- Legg Park, Carrickfergus, involving 568 children aged Toddler-12 and 270 adults.
- Crumlin Play Park, Crumlin, involving 435 children aged Toddler-12 and 47 adults.
- Six Mile Water Park, Ballyclare, involving 316 children aged Toddler-12 and 120 adults.

Two of these areas were described as *‘not particularly busy in general’*. Thus, there was a *‘benefit to bringing people into the area and seeing it as a space that could be used’* (Council representative 2). As noted:

‘It can be difficult to sell parents and public bodies the idea that play doesn’t have to be about shiny equipment – you have to raise enough curiosity to get people involved.’ (Council representative 2)

Involvement in the ‘CAN Play’ programme reinforced the importance of play to members of the CAN Peace III Partnership, who recognised that this provision promoted whole family involvement and community cohesion as well as use of local outdoor spaces:

‘We on the PEACE III Partnership are delighted with the results from this programme. Parks and green spaces should be places for all of our community to enjoy all year round. This programme encourages families to come out to play in, and enjoy, their local parks.’ (Councillor, CAN Peace III Partnership)

Partnership members also acknowledged the significance of children’s active participation within their communities (Outcome 1) in addition to the value of children being able to engage in enjoyable, creative, imaginative play (Outcome 4):

‘At the CAN PEACE III Partnership we recognise the importance of every child’s place in community life. The chance to be an active part of that community is very important to us and the work we have done on play is a vital element of that. The CAN PEACE III Partnership believes that being able to play means having somewhere safe to play and getting the chance to use your imagination and this has been creatively achieved through a fun programme with PlayBoard.’ (Member of CAN Peace III Partnership)

Parents reported that their children relished the opportunity to play outdoors, especially in winter when they were inclined to stay inside:

'The PlayBoard programme is providing children and young people with a great opportunity to play outdoors in the parks - especially during the winter months when the cold, dark nights tend to keep them indoors.' (Parent)

'The children can't wait to come along to the PlayBoard play sessions – even the cold, dark and wet nights don't deter them!' (Parent)

The comments of one parent illustrate how her own perceptions about play and her child's social skills changed because of his involvement in the programme:

'[My son] has benefited greatly from the CAN positive play programme. Since we started to go this summer I had concerns that he would run off, be too rough with others, snatch etc. This project has shown me that he doesn't need constant direction about how to play. He just needed the fun loving guidance of the amazing PlayBoard girls. I knew he was sociable, but his face lit up at the mention of PlayBoard. I know he loves it and will miss it terribly.' (Parent)

Evaluation of the activity programme 'highlighted the importance of free play programmes in supporting the creation of shared spaces and addressing community difference.' Key impacts for children included development of: new friendships and connections across communities; social interaction skills; positive play mixing between younger and older children; creative and problem solving skills. For parents, carers and grandparents impacts included: interaction with members of other communities at play sessions; better understanding of the importance of play in supporting child development; increased inter-generational interaction through play. Benefits for the wider community included: recognition of the importance of play in children's lives and the positive impacts of outdoor play; positive use of local parks for play, thus combating negative perceptions of children and young people and addressing concerns about their involvement in 'anti-social' behaviour during winter (PlayBoard CAN Peace Partnership III Final Report Form, 2014: 12).

'CAN Play' Play Leader Training Programme

A key recommendation arising from evaluation of the Activity Programme was the need to embed understanding about the importance of play at community level, developing the skills of community based practitioners to lead free play sessions. Consequently PlayBoard applied for, and was allocated, further funding by the CAN Peace III Partnership to devise a Play Leader Training Programme. This programme of three training sessions was delivered to 14 community representatives from Carrickfergus, Antrim and Newtownabbey during April - June 2014. Those involved represented seven settings within the CAN area. A Council representative was disappointed that they were unable to recruit the target number of 20 across the three Councils, commenting that recruitment from schools and playgroups was difficult because *'people feel they don't need to learn about play'* (Council representative 2).

The training was aimed at supporting participants to implement play programmes within their communities. It included an overview of play theory, play types, the importance of positive play to children, communities and in inter-community shared spaces; health and safety, risk-benefit approaches to planning and delivering outdoor play; approaches and techniques for outdoor play sessions in community settings (May – June). In addition to the provision of information (template programme plan, template risk/benefit assessment form, session checklist for planning, ideas for play opportunities, promotional material to support outdoor play), participants experienced different types of play while planning and delivering outdoor play activities. They valued practical opportunities to put the theory into practice:

*‘Learning about outdoor play and how simple but effective the idea is’ ...
‘Learning about the different ways the kids can play and make their own fun’
... ‘Doing it rather than just talking about it, seeing it from kid’s point of view’
... ‘Helped us gain a further insight into our idea’ (PlayBoard CAN Peace Partnership III Final Report Form, 2014: 9-10)*

A site visit and 1:1 planning support session, followed by a supported play session, were delivered in each participant’s setting and the programme concluded with an evaluation session (June – August). Describing the impact on Council employees who had a role in working with children, volunteer youth leaders, and facilitators, a Council representative considered that

‘[The training] gave them a sense of empowerment, made them think more creatively about how they could use the spaces, and reminded them that there are other ways of playing – putting fun into play.’ (Council representative 2)

As with the Activity Programme, evaluation of the Play Leader Training Programme emphasised the benefits of outdoor play in terms of using local spaces, inter-generational interaction and cross-community engagement:

‘[The programme] was important to show people how good our parks are here, as I’m sure many don’t fully appreciate them.’

‘After people attended the event I hope their opinions of what play is will change. It was good to see different families interacting over activities such as den building and parents playing with their children.’

‘Play and imagination are things every child has in common, so the more opportunities they have to play together the better the engagement will be and the relationships built.’ (PlayBoard CAN Peace Partnership III Final Report Form, 2014: 13)

Involvement in the training affected practitioners’ perceptions about outdoor play as an activity in itself:

‘Programme changed my attitudes to outdoor play – that you don’t need to “structure” things or have a lot of resources to ensure kids have fun.’

'It has really encouraged us and opened our eyes to new ideas and perspectives on play. Opportunities to feed children's imaginations and play together as a team. We have realised that limitations (eg rain) shouldn't prevent us from playing outdoors.' (PlayBoard CAN Peace Partnership III Final Report Form, 2014: 13, 16)

Further, play as a stimulus for positive interactions within the community was noted:

'It has opened my mind to outdoor play and to using shared spaces which also develop a sense of community.'

'Play is an invaluable thing for children and it can be such an important tool and vehicle in bringing people together as everyone can be involved positively.' (PlayBoard CAN Peace Partnership III Final Report Form, 2014: 13)

PlayBoard staff considered that the opportunity for sustainability was diminished by the practitioner training and capacity building programme being delivered at a different time from the outdoor play activity programme. It was suggested that running the programmes together would have increased community and Council 'buy-in'. However, a Council representative commented that she had seen what staff had learned being *'embedded more'* in their practice: *'three staff have continued with that outdoor element of work and the programmes run by youth leaders include some of the elements they learnt'* (Council representative 2). She considered that there were *'more advocates now because they are thinking differently about play'*. The programme had improved community based practitioners' understanding about play, increased their knowledge about the playwork approach, developed their skills and ability to plan and successfully deliver outdoor play sessions in their own settings. Bringing together practitioners from across the CAN Council areas led to establishment of new relationships with colleagues outside their usual settings.

PlayBoard provided a vignette based on the 'CAN Play' programme for a CES publication: *Improving health and wellbeing outcomes in the early years: research and practice* (November 2014). A poster about the 'CAN Play' project was designed to record the process and impacts of the programme for children and parents. This was displayed at the 'Improving Children's Lives International Conference', held at Queen's University Belfast in February 2014 and attended by 200 researchers, policy makers and practitioners who came together to consider how best to improve services for children and young people. Thus, information sharing about this programme also contributed to Outcomes 1 and 2 for other stakeholders. Further, one of the Junior Ministers described in the Northern Ireland Assembly how this programme had informed Northern Ireland policy development (Outcome 3):

'[At the Play Symposium organised by the 4-Nations Play Forum in Glasgow in March 2014] PlayBoard presented its community-based 'CAN Play' project, which it delivered in Carrickfergus, Antrim and Newtownabbey with the support of Peace III funding. That project has inspired one strand of the Signature Programme that will build on the PlayBoard concept to help to support communities to provide for play.' (Hansard Report, Volume 93, No. 5, p36, 24.3.2014)

5.3 Key Findings

- That individuals and community groups have contacted PlayBoard for advice and support demonstrates public knowledge and understanding about their advocacy role.
- Development of play opportunities is not necessarily expensive, especially if the resources used are recycled or activities are based on children using their imaginations in the available space.
- PlayBoard's contacts and relationships with Councils facilitated some of their advocacy work at the local level and, in most cases, community concerns were resolved. Importantly, PlayBoard did not take sole responsibility but worked alongside local community representatives.
- There is clearly potential for PlayBoard to develop links with communities in the Republic of Ireland, contributing to the development of all-Ireland play advocacy work.
- Community planning is likely to be a significant 'driver' for community advocacy in the future. PlayBoard could use this as the basis of its work on protecting play spaces and developing play opportunities in communities and with Councils.
- PlayBoard's work in communities has entailed greater partnership working with Councils. Given limited funding, the need to pool resources and share learning, this has been beneficial and the involvement of local Councils should ensure sustainability of programmes.
- Working with the new 'super-Councils', it will be important to recognise the difficulties involved in clarifying the roles and responsibilities of diverse groups (including councillors, pre-school groups, education, youth service, police, community and voluntary sector organisations, residents associations), some of which do not recognise their role in promoting or providing play.
- PlayBoard has piloted successfully approaches to inform future work.
- The establishment and maintenance of positive relationships with Councils has enabled PlayBoard to provide practical advice and support to enhance play opportunities, contributing to increased understanding among councillors and other agencies about the value of play beyond fixed play parks.
- The 'CAN Play' Activity Programme encouraged whole family involvement and contributed to community cohesion, reinforcing the significance of children as active participants within their communities and the value of children's engagement in enjoyable, creative, imaginative play.
- Community-based practitioners involved in the 'CAN Play' Play Leader Training Programme valued the practical opportunities they had to put theory about planning and delivering outdoor play activities into practice in their own settings. Training and support developed for this Programme could be used to promote outdoor play opportunities with practitioners and volunteers in communities throughout Northern Ireland and in the Republic.
- PlayBoard has been effective in sharing learning about programme development, implementation and outcomes using accessible formats which have been widely disseminated.
- PlayBoard has used evaluation recommendations to further develop or progress programmes.

6. WORK WITH GOVERNMENT

6.1 Overview of Work

PlayBoard has aimed to achieve ‘greater strategic understanding and recognition of the importance of children’s and young people’s right to play across social policy’ (Outcome 3) through a combination of campaigns, consultation responses, and direct engagement with politicians and departmental officials. Through such activities, PlayBoard has also been ‘strengthening the capacity and ability’ of these stakeholders ‘to articulate children’s and young people’s play needs and rights’ (Outcome 2).

Consultation Responses

PlayBoard has responded consistently to key Government consultations, highlighting the importance of play on a cross-departmental basis. This has included consultation responses being submitted to the Departments of: Social Development (DSD); Health, Social Services and Public Safety (DHSSPS); Education (DENI); Employment and Learning (DEL); Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD); and the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister (OFMDFM):

- *DSD Housing Strategy for Northern Ireland* (October 2012)
- *DSD Urban Regeneration and Community Development Policy* (October 2012)
- *DHSSPS Fit and Well, Changing Lives 2012-2022* (October 2012)
- *DENI Priorities for Youth* (December 2012)
- *DENI Learning to Learn* (January 2013)
- *OFMDFM Towards a Childcare Strategy* (April, 2013)
- *HMRC Tax Free Childcare* (October 2013)
- *DEL NEETS* (October 2013)
- *DARD Rural Development Programme 2014-2020* (October 2013)
- *DEL Northern Ireland 2014-2020 ESF Investment for Growth and Jobs Programme* (October 2013)
- *OFMDFM Delivering Social Change* (March 2014)
- *Consultation on Childcare Account of Provision* (June, 2014)
- *OFMDFM Discussion Paper: The NI Executive’s Strategy for Affordable and Integrated Childcare* (July 2014)
- *Special EU Programmes Body Consultation on Peace 4 Programme* (August, 2014)
- *OFMDFM Consultation on a Racial Equality Strategy for Northern Ireland 2014-2024* (October, 2014)
- *OFMDFM Enquiry into Together Building a United Community* (October, 2014)
- *DENI Enquiry into Shared and Integrated Education* (October, 2014)
- *DoE Consultation on the Draft Local Government (Community Planning Partners) Order (Northern Ireland) 2015* (December, 2014)
- *DENI Draft Budget* (December, 2014)
- *OFMDFM Consultation on the Draft Budget* (December, 2014)
- *Submission to the Heenan Anderson Commission (Independent examination into the causes of current levels of economic marginalisation and deprivation in Northern Ireland)* (January, 2015)

- DHSSPS *Consultation on the Service Framework for Children and Young People* (January, 2015)
- *Children's Services Co-operation Bill Response* (February, 2015)
- DoE *Draft Statutory Guidance for the Operation of Community Planning* (March, 2015)
- DARD *Committee on Road Traffic Speed Limit Bill* (May, 2015)
- DENI *Report on Findings of Consultative Work with Children and Young People on the Department of Education's 'Deferring School Starting Age in Exceptional Cases' Consultation* (June 2015)
- DENI *Consultation on 'Proposals for the Future of the Youth Council'* (July 2015)
- DARD *Consultation on the Draft Children and Young People Action Plan* (September 2015)
- OFMDFM *Consultation on 'Proposals to Extend Age Discrimination Legislation (Age Goods, Facilities and Services)'* (October 2015)
- DEL *Consultation on 'New Further Education Strategy for Northern Ireland'* (October 2015)
- DENI *Response to call for evidence to inform Committee stage of Addressing Bullying in Schools* (January 2016)

Commissioned Consultations with Children to Inform Policy Development

In addition, departmental officials have commissioned PlayBoard to consult children. For example, regarding Northern Ireland's childcare strategy (March 2013) and deferral of the school starting age (March 2015) (see Section 3).

Recognising their responsibility to gain the views of children, an official identified the role that PlayBoard could play in gathering relevant information:

'PlayBoard has expertise in engaging children of a younger age group. They have the necessary skills and experience to get the right results and use their engagement in the right way. They carry out an important task for us – it's important for us to talk to children and a resource like PlayBoard is very useful.' (DENI Official)

Beyond acknowledging the obligation to seek children's views, this official appreciated the value of children's responses:

'Children's views are important and that is something we wanted to do. It's the right thing to do. Having seen it done, we recognise these things are worth doing – we are realising what we understood to be a good thing.' (DENI Official)

Advocacy in Relation to Specific Issues

In June 2013 PlayBoard contributed to a Department of Environment Ministerial Summit on Planning and Community Benefits, part of the [then] Minister's engagement with key sectoral bodies (e.g. PlayBoard, Bryson Housing, Northern Ireland Housing Federation) and residents' groups to discuss how planning could be more responsive to community need. Play was identified as a priority, with residents' groups in particular supporting the need for greater recognition of play and protection

of play spaces within planning. This builds on recommendations from the previous evaluation concerning continued work with key organisations and departments to influence planning and housing development.

PlayBoard is represented on the DHSSPS Obesity Steering Group, recognising the significance of play in tackling childhood obesity and improving health and well-being. In January 2015, as part of this Group, PlayBoard contributed to the DHSSPS *Fitter Futures for All* outcomes plan for 2015-2019. During 2014, DHSSPS developed a set of Service Frameworks establishing standards for health and social care. The standards in the *Service Framework for Children and Young People* relate to improving birth outcomes, child development, acute and long term conditions, positive mental health and emotional wellbeing, childhood obesity, children and young people in special circumstances. PlayBoard advocated for greater recognition of the importance of play and, demonstrating the impact of this advocacy, the final version of the Framework refers to the importance of play in children's lives, particularly for children with disabilities.

PlayBoard has been involved in discussions with OFMDFM, DEL, and DHSSPS promoting greater access to training courses capable of meeting demand for qualifications amongst the play sector workforce as a result of the enhanced qualification contained within the *Minimum Standards for Day Care and Childminding for Children Under 12* (see Section 2), and the need to increase the play skilled workforce to meet the demands associated with increased school age childcare places as a result of the *Bright Start* Strategy.

Play and Leisure Implementation Plan

PlayBoard's role in supporting implementation of the *Play and Leisure Implementation Plan* was acknowledged:

'... they were part of that right at the beginning and they helped OFMDFM work with the Councils primarily ... They were also very good at bringing other Departments in ... They worked with DOE and DOJ and DARD. You might not necessarily think play is part of their work but it is. And that's been key. They delivered some of the Plan as well – 'Play Shapers' I think it was called.'
(OFMDFM Official 3)

Maintaining an emphasis on achievement of the actions identified in the *Play and Leisure Implementation Plan*, in June 2014 PlayBoard arranged a meeting with the Junior Ministers to discuss lack of progress. The Junior Ministers then established a Programme Board for Play and Leisure consisting of Special Advisers, a representative from OFMDFM and an independent representative, to oversee implementation of the Plan. PlayBoard was invited, with OFMDFM officials and representatives from the Northern Ireland Children's Commissioner's Office and the National Children's Bureau NI, to join a Play and Leisure Working Group established to support the Programme Board progress roll-out of the Plan.

Lack of funding had led to the Plan being '*put on the back-burner*' (OFMDFM Official 1), although there has recently been an increase in activity aimed at delivering elements of the Implementation Plan:

‘through embedding play within existing relevant policies, programmes or strategies to the mutual benefit of both. This has resulted, for example, in significant investment in play and leisure through the Social Investment Fund, including a project investing £2.5m in new high quality play provision in the Derry Council area.’ (OFMDFM Official 1).

The Junior Minister acknowledged the negative impact of funding deficiencies:

‘... the fact that [the Plan] isn’t being implemented in the way that we would like to right across all Council areas ... or right across the North, is ... more down to funding in terms of OFMDFM. It’s definitely got nothing to do with PlayBoard, I mean, they come with the ideas, and bring the ideas to us.’
(Junior Minister, OFMDFM)

Reinforcing the importance of play within the political agenda, and consolidating cross-party commitment to implementation of the *Play and Leisure Implementation Plan*, PlayBoard has supplied relevant information and encouraged MLAs from all political parties to raise questions about play in the Northern Ireland Assembly. For example, during 2013-2014, questions were raised about: the funds available through the Play Exemplar Programme and the amount each Council had received; how Councils were being assisted to implement the Play and Leisure Strategy; what relevance the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child’s General Comment No. 17 on Article 31 had for the *Play and Leisure Implementation Plan*; what new or additional strategies were being employed to combat the issue of child obesity; whether the 7th signature programme – Play and Leisure – was being given equal standing with the other Signature Programmes. MLAs repeatedly asked for updates about implementation of the *Play and Leisure Policy Statement* and delivery against targets in the associated *Implementation Plan*.

Play and Leisure Signature Project

Despite development of a *Play and Leisure Policy Statement* in 2009 and associated *Play and Leisure Implementation Plan* in 2011, the planned investment intended to enable delivery of this Plan has not materialised. Implementing the recommendation in the previous evaluation that PlayBoard continue to lobby about progression of the actions in the *Play and Leisure Implementation Plan*, the organisation has advocated regularly at Ministerial and departmental levels for investment to support implementation of the Plan. Having been approached by OFMDFM, PlayBoard identified key areas requiring investment and supported the department to develop a business case for funding. ‘Play and Leisure’ was subsequently adopted as the 7th signature project within the Northern Ireland Executive’s ‘Delivering Social Change’ initiative (April 2013). This focused on: supporting greater local access to spaces for play; enhancing planning and support for play at a local level; championing play and the importance of play. The Junior Ministers announced a three-year investment of £1.6 million in this at PlayBoard’s Annual Conference in October 2013. One interviewee suggested that PlayBoard’s influence was evident in the development of this signature project:

‘OFM produced a background paper to take forward the signature project and that mapped across “child rights programming” [a rights-based approach to programme planning and implementation established by Save the Children]. It

was particularly well thought through, which made me wonder if PlayBoard had been influential in providing direction.’ (NICCY representative)

She also commented on PlayBoard’s capacity to respond positively to changing circumstances and to support proactively the implementation of initiatives:

‘PlayBoard are very good at doing what is possible, building commitment in spite of often complex government processes. For example, a Working Group met in October about the first part of the new signature project to discuss how the funding could be spent by March. In that short time we had to develop a strategy, clarify spending against objectives and establish channels for allocating funding. PlayBoard focused on the possibilities. Because they speak to a wide range of people, they put people in contact with each other and made something happen. They didn’t get the funding themselves, they enabled other people to develop and deliver the project [ie the natural play area at Crawfordsburn Country Park].’ (NICCY representative)

‘Let Us Play’ Campaign

In April 2014, PlayBoard launched its ‘Let Us Play’ Campaign, designed to raise awareness about the importance of play, generate political and public support for realisation of the right to play, and support implementation of the Northern Ireland Executive’s *Play and Leisure Policy Statement* and associated *Implementation Plan*. Building on publication of the UN Committee on Rights of the Child’s (2013) General Comment No. 17, adoption of ‘Play and Leisure’ as the Executive’s 7th Signature Programme, and the work of PlayBoard’s Young Researchers Group in identifying the difficulties experienced by children seeking to realise their right to play, this campaign focused on three key messages. Calling on the Northern Ireland Executive, politicians and government departments to respect, protect and fulfil their obligations under UNCRC Article 31 (the right to play), these were:

- introduce necessary legislative, administrative, budgetary, judicial and promotional measures to ensure realisation of Article 31;
- commit to listening to the expert voice of children and young people on how they want to play and enable them to participate in the decision-making process in a genuine and meaningful way;
- encourage the provision of novel and innovative play opportunities and experiences in local communities and natural green spaces.

Developed as a replacement for a ‘Play Manifesto’, this campaign was intended to provide proactive, long-term engagement with political representatives, parties and government departments about how decisions affecting play are made – providing a mechanism for influencing local Council elections (May 2014), parliamentary elections (May 2015) and Northern Ireland Assembly elections (May 2016). The campaign provided an ‘entry route’ for PlayBoard into government departments which previously would have failed to recognise the importance of play or the potential impact of their policies on play.

A letter and campaign material were sent to the Minister and Children’s Champion in each department, including an eight-page briefing outlining key issues relevant to their Department. For example, the briefing sent to the Department of Justice referred to Derry’s Chief Constable commenting that ‘anti-social’ behaviour can

include playing ball games. A letter and campaign materials were also sent to all Committee Clerks and Chairs. Subsequently, PlayBoard was invited to: present to the Justice Committee (May 2014) and submit written evidence to the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister (June 2014); meet the DHSSPS Children's Champion (July 2014) and the Minister for DSD (March 2015); give a presentation about the campaign to the DoE Children and Young People Working Group (October 2014).

These formal processes led to significant practical developments. For example, as part of political engagement undertaken in relation to the 'Let's Play' campaign, the Department of the Environment Minister directed PlayBoard to an internal Children and Young People Working Group chaired by the Department's Children's Champion. Following a presentation to this group, outlining the campaign messages and highlighting the relevance of enhancing access to play for the department's key business units, PlayBoard was invited to have more detailed discussion with the Northern Ireland Environment Agency (a business unit within DoE). Describing this process, an official stated:

'I'd never heard of PlayBoard before they came to give a presentation to the DoE CYP Working Group. They talked about their role and how they had funding for specific projects based on providing informal play areas for children to create their own play – where they are given space and a few structures which they can use for play. I then contacted PlayBoard because this was a concept which resonated with me. I'd been trying to envisage something like this at each of our seven Country Parks and had identified a gap, particularly for very young children.' (DoE Official)

PlayBoard established a connection between the Environment Agency and the Department of Finance and Personnel, resulting in the Agency securing £20,000 to support development of a pilot initiative to increase access to free, natural play activities in Crawfordsburn Country Park (with a view to further roll-out across Northern Ireland Country Parks). PlayBoard facilitated consultation workshops with children in two local primary schools about their priorities in the play area. Their ideas were used to design the area, the intention being to provide a stimulus for similar developments:

'We hope that if our other wardens see what's been put in place in Crawfordsburn, it will inspire them to do something similar at their country park. Most of the structures are made of timber. We have plenty of fallen timber that can be used. We do, however, need some funding for the earth-moving machines and for sawn wood to make structures such as the fort, fencing, and so on.' (DoE Official)

However, he conceded that lack of funding was likely to inhibit further development:

'At the moment we're seriously strapped for money. Just keeping our properties open is the main concern at the moment. It's sad because I've been in this post for about 15 years and this is the first time I've been able to deliver an informal play area along these lines.' (DoE Official)

The 'Let Us Play' Campaign has continued to provide the basis for discussions and engagement with government, including input to development of the emerging *Strategy for Children and Young People 2016-2026*. In the run-up to the Assembly elections in May 2016, the 'Let Us Play' campaign provided the foundation for PlayBoard's election manifesto. Launched in March 2016, this manifesto promotes the importance of play and need for policy change in four key areas: formal and informal education; recreational space (i.e. parks and public spaces); community, neighbourhood and local streets; Stormont's wider child policy agenda.

Direct Engagement with Politicians and Departmental Officials

Several interviewees emphasised the value of PlayBoard's positive relationships with government officials:

'[PlayBoard CEO] is very good at building relationships with the right people in different departments, keeping in touch with people. If she's helping them, they'll support her.' (OFMDFM Official 1)

Awareness of the organisation's work within the children's sector and in relation to children's rights led to an invitation to PlayBoard's CEO and Director of Service Delivery and Development to speak to the Equality Steering Group in the Department for Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD) about the meaning and importance of play. This helped officials understand that play impacted on the work of the Department in terms of its responsibility for the rural development programme, management of Forestry Services, which includes parks, and use of natural areas.

Civil servants from OFMDFM were invited to lead workshops at PlayBoard's 2013 Annual Conference. This experience provided an opportunity for them to engage directly with Conference delegates about the Executive's focus on and investment in play and how to progress the *Play and Leisure Implementation Plan*. One official stated that this experience was useful in development of the Childcare Strategy:

'I spoke at one of their conferences, in 2013. I received a very positive response ... I liked listening to the other presentations and had the opportunity to meet child care providers. I established contacts and got to go out and see their childcare settings. That I found invaluable – where you see the setting in their community and the respect the community has for the setting – you can't learn that off a page. Meeting people upfront was important, and meeting researchers working in this area as well as other stakeholders.' (OFMDFM Official 2)

As a result of its comprehensive networking, PlayBoard has helped to establish useful connections between government departments and organisations/ bodies working to implement policies 'on the ground': *'PlayBoard has been instrumental in helping me develop links with Councils because of their links'* (OFMDFM Official 1).

PlayBoard invited the Junior Ministers to join the Northern Ireland contingent attending the Play Symposium organised by the 4-Nations Play Forum in Glasgow (March 2014) (see Section 7). Highlighting the benefits of direct engagement with politicians and policy makers, the Junior Minister revealed how exposure to

innovative practice also 'strengthens capacity to articulate children's play needs and rights' among these stakeholders (Outcome 2), 'enhancing opportunities for play' (Outcome 4):

'I also visited a bus that is part of the Scottish "Play Talk Read" campaign. The campaign promotes the critical importance of play in the earliest years of a child's life and provides many resources to parents and carers. We would like to build on existing initiatives here to ensure that everyone appreciates that play is a vital ingredient in the development of our children through to adulthood. The experience that we shared at the symposium will help us to achieve more and to increase the opportunities for children and young people to gain all the benefits of play and leisure.' (Hansard Report, Volume 93, No. 5, p36, 24.3.2014)

PlayBoard staff have attended all main Party Conferences. They met with political advisers to discuss PlayBoard's proposals before the 2014 local elections. Significantly, the Alliance Party, DUP, Sinn Féin, and SDLP Party Manifestos referred to affordable childcare – one of PlayBoard's priority areas in relation to school age childcare – although this was not the case in either the Ulster Unionist Party nor the Green Party Manifestos.

PlayBoard as the Lead Organisation Influencing Social Policy in Relation to Play

PlayBoard's influence on the promotion of play within social policy is recognised by other organisations:

'They do a good job there [influencing social policy]. You would have to recognise the work they do in that area. Without them, there would be no voice for play.' (Council representative 1)

'PlayBoard is a very co-operative organisation. They lead on play and are always very good. We would liaise with them to make sure we're not competing, not overlapping.' (NICCY representative)

Placing this influence in the context of broader issues, one person stated: *'... play is a low priority. When you look at the Junior Ministers announcing £1.6 million – that amount of monies is neither here nor there'* (Council representative 1). Also, 'play' as a topic is *'a single area and a very difficult area because it's seen as a fluffy add-on'* (Former Children's Commissioner). However, PlayBoard was perceived to have challenged this perspective through an emphasis on Outcome 1:

'What [PlayBoard Director] and PlayBoard have done is promote play as fundamental to children's life and development, and the importance of this – changing the mind-set.' (Former Children's Commissioner)

'PlayBoard is really good at helping you understand the connection between play and leisure and other developmental needs or entitlements.' (OFMDFM Official 1)

For some interviewees there was a sense that, given demands on time and the specific role of their own organisation, they were content for PlayBoard to take the lead role:

'PlayBoard has a role in terms of social policy ... there are some views about whether they are the only organisation ... But, for us, we have enough to do so let them get on with it!' (Council representative 1)

'Play and leisure was a big issue for NICCY. It was important to make sure that we weren't duplicating anything. There was a bigger role for PlayBoard in this than for NICCY, so we left PlayBoard to do this and NICCY focused on something else – let PlayBoard do their job. We decided NICCY's role was at a higher level ... to influence policy upstream, leaving other organisations to fulfil the role of making sure policies are implemented.' (Former Children's Commissioner)

Influencing Social Policy

The Director of Play Wales highlighted the importance of *'developing relationships with people'* and *'positioning ourselves'* with those in devolved government departments. He commented that *'Some officials are very arrogant. They don't have an idea how the real world operates'*, and described how these officials are occasionally dismissive of suggestions made by individual organisations, perceiving them to be a *'pressure group'*. At the same time, *'There are other officials who are very sensitive to the nuances of the play sector and are receptive to the principle of dialogue and working to best effect based on one another's strengths'*. Interviewed officials in Northern Ireland affirmed the latter. They welcomed collaboration with PlayBoard, perceiving mutual benefits.

PlayBoard's established expertise in conducting consultations with younger children to inform departmental consultation processes was clearly recognised:

'PlayBoard focus on engaging with young children ... One of the issues is how we identify PlayBoard as opposed to another body – we have to be careful that we don't breach procurement rules. But I'm not aware of other bodies that provide this service. They provided a good standard of work, which met our objectives ... They were very open, we had a good discussion about what we wanted them to do, and they produced a report to good standard. We'd engage with them again because of the quality of the work. They helped to move the consultation forward.' (DENI Official)

Further, the provision of relevant information is a critical element of work with government:

'PlayBoard as an organisation has helped ... develop understanding at a strategic, policy level across the public sector ... Although there may be no money, they bring awareness and understanding through bringing reports and information to the table that describe links between departmental responsibilities ... they provide evidence to strengthen strategic outcomes.' (OFMDFM Official 1)

'Their publications are useful for research purposes. We could use the information they provided to build a case for the Childcare Strategy.'
(OFMDFM Official 2)

Direct engagement with key officials is also vital:

'I think that's one of the key things that they would do ... they're very close to Departmental officials and informing them and that, in turn, informs policy.'
(OFMDFM Official 3)

Presentation of written and oral evidence helps 'shape' the direction and/or content of policies. For example, one official described PlayBoard's influence on development of the *Together Building United Communities* 'good relations' policy. The organisation lobbied to ensure that an element of the core funding allocated to Councils and other organisations was play and children's development:

'PlayBoard gave evidence to say this was important, and why ... not about building play parks or leisure centres but the development of children and young people, development of links with other communities, identity and self-esteem.' (OFMDFM Official 1)

Another official explained how PlayBoard 'influenced the direction of policy' concerning childcare:

'They made a very clear and reasoned case for school-aged childcare and the content, or curriculum if you like, of that childcare. They were very good, powerful advocates. The argument they presented corresponded to statistical work that we had done. We did a parental survey and drew together figures about age groups and the number of registered places which provided evidence of under-provision. PlayBoard's submission complemented this information.' (OFMDFM Official 2)

Even when funding is not available for fresh initiatives, PlayBoard's advocacy work informs existing policy and planned practice.

It is also useful to collaborate with other organisations, particularly when raising shared concerns and proposing recommendations for change. The former Children's Commissioner described the advantages of collective involvement with cross-government bodies for all the participants:

'The All Party Group [on Children and Young People] used to involve politicians and the children's sector – helping everyone understand the impact of specific issues, like ASBOs, and to express a collective voice. It's important to work collectively around issues as there is strength in numbers and the government can't disregard what is being said. NICCY was at the table as an observer and it was important for us to hear what was going on in the sector.'

Another interviewee emphasised that, *'For policy-makers, there has to be relevance'* and suggested that working with departmental Children's Champions is crucial.

A particular difficulty, noted in the previous evaluation, is constant staff changes in government departments:

'Each time it happens, it's as if we're starting from new, as if there's no history. There's no continuity across the civil servants.' (NICCY representative).

'One of the frustrations is that Ministers and civil servants constantly change. No-one takes ownership of policy ... Everything is short term - 4 years - the next election is their focus.' (PlayBoard Board of Directors)

Another difficulty faced by many organisations working for policy change is that, *'at a strategic level, you can't measure what you do ... It's a major conundrum, being able to articulate influence'* (Director, Play Wales).

The evaluation provided an opportunity to explore perceptions about PlayBoard's influencing role via interviews with key stakeholders. This revealed that, in addition to monitoring and advocating for implementation of relevant policies, PlayBoard also informs development of new initiatives and strategies:

'PlayBoard worked with OFMDFM on the Play and Leisure Strategy. A lot of their role was being able to influence government. They also influenced the development of 'Bright Start' [Childcare Strategy] and have won the tender to deliver that. They have continued to influence policy and legislation.' (Former Children's Commissioner)

'You can see their influence in government. Any initiative that's taken forward by government - the decision to take the initiative and the way it is taken forward - has been influenced by PlayBoard. For example, the Play and Leisure Implementation Plan. PlayBoard did a lot of work to get it to a certain point. The Ministers changed, and then it got lost. But PlayBoard plug away consistently in the background.' (NICCY representative)

The Junior Minister affirmed:

'They've nearly been involved in everything that we are involved in with children and young people to be fair ... they've worked very well on everything with us ... particularly at a policy level but also in terms of implementation of programmes and projects' [e.g. in relation to the Childcare Strategy, community relations, the Play and Leisure Implementation Plan, the Play and Leisure Signature Project, the next Children and Young People Strategy] (Junior Minister, OFMDFM)

Adoption of a pre-emptive approach by organisations attempting to influence policy was endorsed by officials and politicians:

'They should get in early and be proactive about contacting the right policy people in the Department if they have specific views rather than wait for a consultation to be launched – meet officials about the issue to influence the style of consultation documents and build on children's views in consultation responses ... They should also be proactively meeting officials – having quarterly or 6-weekly meetings to find out what the Department is working on. Although officials' hands may be tied in terms of what the Minister is working on, they can give an idea about developments.' (DENI Official)

'I would advise them always to make sure that they're in constant contact with people ... invite Ministers out ... to see what's actually working on the ground at first hand ... you're pushing at an open door in terms of ... children and young people.' (Junior Minister, OFMDFM)

Considering attempts to improve communication between government officials and civil society, one official gave an example of PlayBoard's involvement in development (and future implementation) of a Childcare Strategy:

'We're developing the full childcare strategy using a co-design model involving civil society, and developing a partnership to advise us on the content. PlayBoard are very active participants in this process. They have attended all our workshops and were involved in a long interview. They've had a significant influence on the strategy. We plan to maintain this stakeholder group as a Forum, a kind of monitoring committee ... The role of the Forum would be to ask questions such as "Why are targets not being met?" "Where is the problem?" "Is this about a lack of provision or budget?" "Does this require some capacity building?"' (OFMDFM Official 2)

Discussing dissemination of General Comment No. 17 in England, one interviewee stated that *'Government is put off by people quoting the UN. You have to put it to Government in terms of health and well-being, development – things they will engage with'* (Chair, Play Safety Forum). However, promotion of children's rights by PlayBoard and other organisations was considered to have contributed to significant change in attitudes and use of language among politicians in Northern Ireland:

'There's been a huge shift with politicians. It used to be that some politicians would not recognise the importance of rights ... But now you can talk about rights and people do believe they are fundamental ... At NICCY, we had more Unionist politicians coming for help and support – they could see the value in using the mechanism of a child's right to a service. We've also got away from "parent's" versus "children's" rights' ... that mind-set has changed over the years. In Assembly debates or questions the UNCRC is commonly referred to. It's part of the language in a way that it wouldn't have been 8 years ago, with people talking about Article 31 or Article 12. It's above party politics - it's now seen as being the right thing to do.' (Former Children's Commissioner)

6.2 Case Study: School Age Childcare

PlayBoard's involvement in lobbying for the inclusion of school age childcare within a Northern Ireland *Childcare Strategy* provides a useful example of how activities aimed at achieving Outcomes 1 and 2 have supported the attainment of Outcome 3.

Since 2011, PlayBoard has raised awareness about the importance of school age childcare within the development of a *Childcare Strategy* (see previous evaluation). A survey, mapping of deprivation indices and consultations had informed production of the *State of the School Age Childcare Sector Report* by PlayBoard in November 2012. This was distributed to key stakeholders, including OFMDFM departmental officials working on development of a *Childcare Strategy*. Publication of this Report led to direct engagement during November 2012 - April 2013 with the consultant appointed by OFMDFM to progress development of the *Childcare Strategy*;

developing understanding about the school age childcare sector, services provided, wider impacts on society (e.g. job creation, economic growth within communities) and financial models for sustainable delivery.

OFMDFM commissioned PlayBoard to design and conduct consultations with children and young people about the draft *Childcare Strategy*. Six focus groups and the distribution of 800 questionnaires were arranged via school age childcare providers. In addition, PlayBoard organised five consultation focus groups with PlayBoard members during January - February 2013 to discuss the draft *Childcare Strategy*, and conducted a survey of its members. The views gathered during these processes were analysed and presented in the Report *Towards a Childcare Strategy* (PlayBoard, April 2013). PlayBoard members were also encouraged to formulate and submit their own consultation responses to OFMDFM. One official stated:

'They were very powerful advocates. They provided a detailed consultation submission, attended consultation events and organised consultation events to which we were invited. I was very impressed by their devotion and level of involvement.' (OFMDFM Official 2)

PlayBoard's own consultation response not only highlighted the need for increased school age childcare for 5-14 year olds, but also that such provision should be distinct from education:

'So that it wasn't an extension of school work but was more focused on childhood - including games, sports, reading comics, watching TV - child-centred and play-oriented, not children doing homework under supervision. PlayBoard presented powerful advocacy of this approach. They were very welcoming of the fact that we were focusing on school age childcare but were clear that, if we were using the school estate, we needed to make sure there was a clear separation between school time and child care time.' (OFMDFM Official 2)

As part of the process of influencing policy development, PlayBoard emphasised with department officials the importance of play to child development and the work of these providers, as well as promoting playwork qualifications:

'PlayBoard argued that the call for proposals to run childcare facilities should include criteria in terms of play provision, that staff should be skilled to a certain level, about the design of the room, etc.' (OFMDFM Official 1)

PlayBoard was invited to give a presentation to the OFMDFM Directorate team about school age childcare as part of the business planning process (May 2013). *Bright Start, the Northern Ireland Executive's Strategy for Affordable and Integrated Childcare* subsequently identified School Age Childcare as the first key priority, leading to significant investment in this sector for the first time since the early 2000s. Acknowledging the importance of school age childcare, and demonstrating the impact of PlayBoard's lobbying on this issue, the Strategy included reference to specific issues identified in the *State of the School Age Childcare Sector* Report and during consultations with children (e.g. provision in rural areas and for children with disabilities). The consultation undertaken with children by PlayBoard was noted within the *Bright Start* document (OFMDFM, 2013: 8).

In September 2013 the Junior Ministers announced the introduction of *Bright Start*, stating that allocated funding of £16 million over three years was aimed at increasing 1,000 childcare places to 7,000 in the 25% most deprived wards, in rural areas, and for children with disabilities. In February 2014, PlayBoard hosted an event: '20/20 Vision for School Age Childcare' involving 108 delegates. This aimed to develop the capacity of existing providers and support potential new providers in advance of the launch of *Bright Start* funding.

In March 2014 the official launch of the *Bright Start* Strategy was covered comprehensively by the media, including interviews by PlayBoard's CEO on BBC NI News, UTV News, Cool FM, CityBeat, Downtown, and BBC Talkback. Since then, PlayBoard has continued to act as an Intermediary Funding Body for 40 school age childcare provider groups funded by OFMDFM and is a member of the *Bright Start* stakeholder group involved in setting up and agreeing application processes and grant assessment procedures with the Childcare Partnership in each Trust area (the main management agents).

6.3 Key Findings

- Recognising their responsibility to gain the views of children during consultation processes, government officials appreciated the role that PlayBoard plays in gathering relevant information – especially from younger children. This has led to PlayBoard being commissioned to carry out consultations about topics beyond 'play'.
- PlayBoard's representation on departmental Steering or Working Groups, and involvement in Ministerial summits, ensures that children's right to play is part of government debate.
- In addition to lobbying for recognition of qualifications based on the Playwork approach, PlayBoard has worked to increase access to appropriate training and professional development for the play sector workforce.
- Despite lack of progress in implementation of the *Play and Leisure Implementation Plan* due to insufficient funding, PlayBoard has maintained emphasis on achievement of the actions identified in the *Plan* within its advocacy work. Persistent lobbying for investment to support implementation of the *Plan* led to allocation of funding for 'Play and Leisure' as the 7th signature project within the Executive's 'Delivering Social Change' initiative.
- The 'Let Us Play' campaign provided an 'entry route' for PlayBoard into government departments which previously would not have recognised the importance of play or the potential impact of their policies on play opportunities for children and young people. Subsequently, PlayBoard was invited to present to the Justice Committee, to submit written evidence to the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister, to meet the DHSSPS Children's Champion and the Minister for DSD, and to give a presentation about the campaign to the DoE Children and Young People Working Group.
- PlayBoard has secured a positive reputation and established constructive relationships with department officials, leading to invitations to present to a range of departmental Groups.
- Through its strong and comprehensive networking, PlayBoard has established connections between those in government departments and organisations 'on the ground'.

- Through long-term, supportive and co-operative relationships with the voluntary/ community/ statutory sectors and departmental officials, PlayBoard has successfully positioned itself as the lead organisation influencing social policy in relation to play.
- PlayBoard has utilised a range of methods to ensure that children's play needs and rights are on the political agenda. This includes developing campaigns reflecting the views and experiences of children, providing departmental briefings, and establishing Ministerial Summits with colleagues in the 4-Nations Policy Forum.
- Challenging perception of play as a 'soft' or 'fluffy' topic, PlayBoard has successfully raised awareness about the importance of play as fundamental to the life and development of children/ young people and connected to other entitlements.
- Departmental officials have recognised the positive relationships established with PlayBoard staff and have welcomed collaboration, perceiving this to be mutually beneficial. The provision of relevant information is a critical element of work with government as this evidence can be used to strengthen strategic outcomes or build a case for specific priorities and ways of working.
- Direct engagement with key officials, politicians and departmental Children's Champions, to explain what the issues are and how these inform the work of their Department, remains vital. Presentation of written and oral evidence can also help 'shape' the direction and/or content of policies.
- Despite restricted funding to establish new initiatives, PlayBoard's advocacy work informs policy and planned practice, widening the focus of existing policies to include consideration of play and children/ young people.
- Working with other organisations to raise specific concerns and make recommendations for change has strengthened key messages as a collective response is harder for government to ignore.
- In addition to monitoring implementation of relevant policies, PlayBoard informs the process of policy/ strategy development. Adoption of a pre-emptive approach was endorsed by departmental officials.
- Promotion of children's rights by PlayBoard and other organisations has contributed to a significant change in attitudes and use of language by politicians in Northern Ireland, with reference to the UNCRC and specific Articles now common in Assembly debates or questions.

7. WORK WITH UK AND INTERNATIONAL BODIES

7.1 Overview of Work

In addition to their work on networks or forums in Northern Ireland, PlayBoard is represented on UK and international bodies working to influence understanding about, and promotion of, play. Also contributing to achievement of the Play Advocacy Programme objectives, this work 'strengthens understanding that children and young people are strong, competent social actors in and through their play; that they can effectively participate in decisions about their play; and that play is important for holistic development' (Outcome 1) and 'strengthens the capacity and ability' of colleagues beyond Northern Ireland 'to articulate children's and young people's play needs and rights' (Outcome 2).

Contributing to the Process of Reporting to the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child

In November 2013 PlayBoard attended an OFMDFM workshop about the draft State Party report to the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child. Within the UK Government's report to the Committee, references to play in Northern Ireland note that the Executive published an implementation plan for its Play and Leisure policy in 2011, and that 'up to £1.6 million is being provided to champion play, build sustainable support at community level, and to make planning and support for play central to the work of local councils' (UK Government, 2014, p48). Reference is also made to launch of 'the first phase of *Bright Start* - the Executive's programme for developing affordable and integrated childcare', with anticipated publication of a Childcare Strategy in 2014 (ibid, p22).

PlayBoard contribution to a number of consultation workshops during 2014, and reference to publications co-authored by PlayBoard staff, ensured that a section about play and leisure in the *Northern Ireland NGO Alternative Report* submitted to the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child highlighted a range of evidence-based concerns.⁸ These noted that the *Play and Leisure Implementation Plan* 'has not been resourced, its implementation has been severely curtailed and it has had minimal impact' (Children's Law Centre and Save the Children NI, 2015, p37). Despite OFMDFM's announcement in October 2013 of an agreed investment of £1.6 million, 'as of January 2015, only £20,000 had been released' (ibid). Specific issues relating to play and leisure for children included: 'increased emphasis on educational attainment at the expense of the right to play; lack of spaces and places for teenagers to "hang out" and socialise; negative attitudes of adults towards children; lack of access to appropriate play facilities for all children, including children with a disability, minority ethnic children, children in rural areas, and children in poverty; insufficient participation of children in community planning processes and inadequate consideration of play spaces in planning' (ibid, p38).

⁸ McQuade, L., Kehoe, S. and Emerson, L. (2015) *Are children getting the opportunities to realise their right to play?*, Kids Life and Times Survey, Update 98; O'Loughlin, J., Stevenson, B. and Schubotz, D. (2011) *Playscapes at 16*, Young Life and Times Survey; Schubotz, D. and McCooey, R. (2013) *Playscapes at 16 Revisited: an extended report of the findings of the 2010 YLT Survey*; PlayBoard (2014) *The Right to Play: Young Researchers Investigate Article 31*, Belfast: PlayBoard.

4-Nations Play Safety Forum

In addition to influencing policy and practice in Northern Ireland, PlayBoard has a strong reputation for partnership work with UK play organisations. This has contributed towards influencing policy, practice and knowledge concerning play amongst professionals, policy makers, academics, and organisations beyond Northern Ireland.

PlayBoard is involved in regular collaboration with representatives from the play organisations in Britain, the play industry and the wider leisure sector through the 4-Nation Play Safety Forum. The Forum 'seeks to highlight the importance of ensuring that children experience "good risk" in play, as a way to challenge and support their growth, learning and development' (*PlayBoard Annual Review, 2013: 9*). This focuses on '*mitigating the harm that is being done to children through the world becoming a very risk averse place*' (Director, Play Wales). For example, research has established that existing play areas and experiences often present little challenge to children and young people. This is due mainly to safety considerations which have failed to recognise the important role of play-based risk in supporting child development, and concerns regarding litigation. The impact has been a reduction in children's capacity to challenge their personal abilities, and diminished skills development. Further, a rise in workplace accidents has been linked to the reduction of challenge and risk in play. It has been suggested that this has decreased the ability of adults to identify and adequately address risk in the workplace.

The strength of a collective approach was recognised by interviewees:

'It is really useful to have the 4 nations speaking in concert. For example, in meetings with the Health and Safety Executive. The publications we produced are now recommended by the Health and Safety Executive for use in schools.' (Director, Play Wales)

'Peer group support is an advantage when dealing with controversial topics in an aggressive environment ... When the British Government was investing in play, we achieved some real progress in terms of opening up sorts of play. Cutbacks have made this difficult as they have led to a default position, although we haven't gone back to where we were ... To have a unified voice is the most powerful thing we can do in terms of children's play.' (Chair, Play Safety Forum)

The Forum has engaged in a process to influence '*cultural change*' (Chair, Play Safety Forum), meeting key representatives in the Health and Safety Executive to explain, discuss and agree key messages. Forum members have worked with relevant bodies in each country to produce and disseminate documents aimed at 'strengthening the capacity and ability of key stakeholders to articulate children's play needs and rights' (Outcome 2). The '*model is varied depending on context*' (Director, Play Wales). For example, after agreeing a common press release, each country adjusts details to reflect their local situation.

In Northern Ireland in September 2012, the Play Safety Forum and Northern Ireland Health and Safety Executive Joint Statement: *Children's play and leisure: Promoting a balanced approach* was launched by PlayBoard, the Health and Safety Executive NI and the Junior Ministers with responsibility for children and young people. This was the first statement made by the play sector and the HSE about: the centrality of risk to children's play experiences; the importance of risk in supporting the development of children's skills and abilities; and a need to redress the imbalance between 'risk' and 'benefit' within many play areas and activities. The Acting Deputy Chief Executive of the HSENI stated:

'HSENI has always followed a policy of sensible risk management therefore we welcome this statement which helps to bring clarity to an often misunderstood topic ... HSENI fully supports the principles contained within the statement' (PlayBoard Annual Review, 2013: 9).

The Joint Statement was disseminated by PlayBoard to all Council CEOs, Directors of Leisure Services and relevant Play Officers with a view to stimulating positive consideration of 'risk benefit' within the context of play.

This was progressed in November 2014 with a launch of the *'Risk-Benefit Assessment Form'* by the Play Safety Forum, a practical tool to support play providers re-examine play provision by considering both risk and benefit together. The assessment tool was publicised by PlayBoard through a presentation: *Changing Landscapes, Changing Lives* at a Western Area Child Care Partnership meeting in March 2015, followed by a pilot training session in Ballymena a month later. Targeted communication was sent to primary schools, new Super-Council CEO's, and senior officers in charge of leisure services within Councils.

As part of the Play Safety Forum, in October 2013 PlayBoard participated in the launch of the *Managing Risk in Play* guidance (aimed at Councils and those planning/ providing play provision) at Westminster. This brought together representatives from across the play sector, private play providers and government.

International Play Association: Promoting the Child's Right to Play

The President of the IPA described how PlayBoard directly informed development of the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child's General Comment No. 17 on Article 31:

'PlayBoard provided information and advice in the draft stages of development of the General Comment, and the Director of PlayBoard was on the end of the phone and available to comment at any time.' (President, IPA)

In 2013, the General Comment was launched at an IPA World Conference held in Geneva. Two PlayBoard staff attended and the Young Researchers Group poster *'The Right to Play: A31 – Making Play a Reality for Children and Young People in Northern Ireland'* was displayed and distributed.

Describing the two-way purpose of IPA Conferences, held every three years, the President of the IPA stated:

'[IPA Conferences] are an opportunity to share work that's been done on a national basis with an international audience, and to learn from international work with a view to informing national developments.'

Affirming the valuable involvement of PlayBoard, she commented:

'The PlayBoard team always make significant and important contributions to these discussions. That international output is important - it's where projects at national level can contribute to discussions at international level, to workers in different parts of the world. That's important because play has different status in different parts of the world. Their interaction is valued. It's contributing to a much bigger picture.'

In 2014 PlayBoard gave three presentations at the International Play Association (IPA) Global Conference in Turkey, which was attended by 340 international delegates. One presentation outlined the journey of the Young Researchers Group, the findings of their work and how this had impacted at a political and policy level (see Section 3). IPA members from the USA, New Zealand, China and a number of European countries showed particular interest in the capacity-building processes established to support the young researchers to conduct peer research, and how the work of the group had influenced policy and government. The publications produced by the Group were distributed to attendees, a number of whom approached PlayBoard staff to further discuss the methodological processes underpinning the participatory research. The second presentation focused on PlayBoard's involvement in delivering the 'My Spaces - Positive Play' initiative in Derry (see Section 4) and the third on development and implementation of the 'CAN Play' Programme (see Section 5).

PlayBoard has also informed international policy and practice via contributions to the IPA journal *Play Rights Magazine*:

'PlayBoard contributed a really good piece a couple of years ago about the work they had done on a particular project on the Shankill Road [i.e. Lower Shankill Residents Voice]. There are not many journals that prioritise and promote practice-based information for influencers who work to advocate play. And this goes out to 50 countries around the world who are IPA members.' (President, IPA)

7.2 Case Study: 4-Nations Play Policy Forum

With colleagues from Scotland, Wales and England, PlayBoard is a member of the 4-Nations Play Policy Forum. In terms of UK-wide initiatives, the four nations collaborate in delivery of annual 'Play Days'.

Co-operation to inform policy and practice

There is regular contact between the CEOs of PlayBoard, Play Wales, Play Scotland and Play England about key issues. One described the benefits of this co-operation:

'We increasingly recognise one another's strengths and work very effectively in partnership and in relation to critical friendship ... Across the 4 nations, we all have different high and low points. We support each other. There is significant benefit in that.' (Director, Play Wales).

In addition, they draw on colleagues' experiences to inform policy in their own countries:

'If there has been a development in Northern Ireland that we think is persuasive, we will draw officials' and Ministers' attention to it.' (Director, Play Wales)

The Director of Play Scotland commented that they *'build on good practice across the nations'*:

'We have similar building blocks in place that generate different outputs – although the outcomes are similar (for example, promoting play in school grounds), they are nuanced ... In each country we've had to work out where play sits best in integrated children's services planning.'

The Chair of the Play Policy Forum described how *'they take each other's successes to support advocacy in their own countries ... quoting each other and learning from being at different stages of development.'* He also recognised PlayBoard's specific contribution:

'The importance of PlayBoard in the context of the UK play sector shouldn't be under-estimated. It might be difficult to perceive the role it is playing, but it is vital.' (Chair, Play Policy Forum)

Play Symposia

The 4-Nations Play Policy Forum organises a bi-ennial Play Symposium, described by one interviewee as *'the most significant strategic development'* (Director, Play Wales). He recognised the insight of PlayBoard in establishing these symposia:

'The role PlayBoard played in starting the Ministerial Symposiums rolling was important – the level of risk that involved was very significant. That has been absolutely invaluable.'

At the symposia, officials and Ministers from each country *'reflect on what they do and what they might do better - it's useful for them to step outside their country'* (Director, Play Wales). This was affirmed by one of the Junior Ministers who attended the 2014 Symposium:

'...even that symposium, to have that. You know, I've never seen all that come together in that type of a place ... it was good - learning both ways ... we were imparting information to them, and experience ... and we learnt from them.' (Junior Minister, OFMDFM)

The 2012 Play Symposium was held in Cardiff at which the Northern Ireland delegation included the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young

People, officials from OFMDFM, representatives from the Children and Young People's Strategic Partnership and PlayBoard's Board of Directors. The range of issues discussed included: UNCRC General Comment No. 17, the Welsh Play Sufficiency Model, identification of dedicated funding for play by the Scottish Executive, progression of the Play and Leisure Policy in Northern Ireland, and lack of political will to progress play in England (PlayBoard *Annual Review*, 2013: 10).

The 2014 Play Symposium held in Glasgow was attended by one of the Junior Ministers and a Special Adviser, OFMDFM officials, the Commissioner for Children and Young People, the Commissioning lead for the Health and Social Care Board, and members of PlayBoard's Board of Directors. The Junior Minister was invited by the Scottish Minister for Children and Young People to present an address about recent developments and future plans to enhance opportunities for play and leisure in Northern Ireland. Discussing this experience in the Northern Ireland Assembly, the Junior Minister noted that a common theme across jurisdictions was that *'play rarely has an obvious Department lead'* (Hansard Report, Volume 93, No. 5, p36, 24.3.2014). Acknowledging that *'many Departments, agencies and voluntary and community organisations provide for play in its own right and as a medium to address issues such as physical and mental health and social needs'*, she stated this *'highlights the importance of a joined-up approach to providing play'* (ibid). In addition to providing a platform for sharing information about local play policy and practice, the Junior Minister described how the symposium enabled her and other participants to be informed about developments in other countries.

At a Board meeting in April 2014, one of the PlayBoard Board members who had attended the symposium noted that it had reinforced PlayBoard's profile in relation to play across the UK and affirmed the importance of work in which it is engaged. The former Children's Commissioner highlighted the benefits of the Symposium in terms of sharing knowledge across the UK and internationally:

'In Scotland, PlayBoard produced the charter, which we collectively signed as the 4 Children's Commissioners. I was aware of the work being carried out in individual jurisdictions as well as work done collectively. This was useful when meeting other people. For example, Play England came to a meeting of the European Network of Ombudspersons and Commissioners to raise awareness of play across Europe and at an international level.'

Shared messages

The 4-Nations Play Policy Forum established joint messages to inform lobbying during the pre-election period preceding the Westminster General Election in March - April 2015. These were sent to all candidates in Northern Ireland, accompanied by a press release to the sector. The following month a letter of congratulations was delivered to the 18 elected MPs, with a copy of PlayBoard's proposals concerning play.

In August 2014, the 4-Nations Play Policy Forum and Association of Play Industries published a report: *The Play Return: a review of the wider impact of play initiatives* highlighting evidence aimed at building a case for improving the play opportunities of children and young people. The catalyst for this report was a 4-Nations Roundtable

meeting held in October 2013 with Nick Hurd, former Minister for Civil Society, in which PlayBoard had participated. At this meeting, the Forum members had advocated for the inclusion of play within the coalition government's future policy and the Minister had agreed to progress cross-departmental commitment to the integration of play, particularly across education and health.

Shared difficulties

Outlining shared difficulties faced by members of the Play Policy Forum, the Director of Play Wales stated:

'We need to be very up-to-speed with current thinking. There's a lot of academic research, finally, about children's play – with evidence to make the case with people like accountants. The problem is that if you can't measure something, it is deemed to be not of value. Now there are publications emphasising how, developmentally, play is imperative. But it's difficult to promote this in a world where everything is commodified.'

Further, play remains undervalued. For example, in Wales, despite the existence of a Play Policy since 2002 and a legal duty being placed on local authorities to provide for children's play in 2010, *'people have no idea about the developments that have taken place. They don't see the importance of play. We haven't impacted on the zeitgeist'* (Director, Play Wales). He affirmed that:

'What we're trying to do is work on that in all 4 nations – being innovative, creative, finding gaps and loopholes to see how we can work effectively to have sustained impact. We have to persuade Government that we need some kind of promotional campaign - like the Sports Councils. We have to persuade the people that are giving out the money.'

He noted the changing dynamics of cross-jurisdictional work:

'In terms of the UK, in the early days the similarities between the jurisdictions were greater than the differences. Now the differences are becoming more apparent. But it's still useful for us to work together. Now it's more pertinent to find out what's happening in the 3 nations, rather than in England.'

A significant difference between the nations is the source of available funding: *'we have to modify the case for play with different funders and it's useful to know how things apply elsewhere'* (Director, Play Scotland). However, it is important for play organisations to emphasise that,

'... sometimes initiatives promoting play - such as use of green spaces or community spaces, building dens rather than using equipment - don't necessarily require more money. Sometimes low investment in play can have large outcomes.' (Director, Play Scotland).

7.3 Key Findings

- Reference to issues raised during consultation workshops and publications co-authored by PlayBoard staff ensured that the section about 'play and leisure' in the *Northern Ireland NGO Alternative Report* highlighted a range of evidence-based concerns regarding implementation of children's right to play.
- Through the 4-Nations Play Safety Forum, collaboration with PlayBoard's counterparts in England, Wales and Scotland has led to development of collectively agreed messages with key organisations such as the Health and Safety Executive which are then adapted to suit the context of each jurisdiction.
- The 4-Nations Play Policy Forum provides an important medium for regular contact between the CEOs of PlayBoard, Play Wales, Play Scotland and Play England. This collaborative commitment enhances PlayBoard's lobbying in Northern Ireland.
- The 4 nations promote play in communities every year through the PlayDay campaign.
- Campaigns developed by the 4-Nations Safety Forum and the 4-Nations Play Policy Forum reinforce the strength of a collective voice when lobbying about specific issues and highlight the need for innovative campaigns aimed at achieving sustained impact.
- The 4-Nations Play Symposia demonstrate the benefits of establishing an opportunity for cross-jurisdictional knowledge exchange at Ministerial level.
- Delivering presentations at the triennial International Play Association conferences ensures that PlayBoard's work in Northern Ireland is shared with an international audience and informed by international 'best practice'.

8. SUMMARY OF LEARNING AND FUTURE DEVELOPMENTS

8.1 Achievement of Strategic Outcomes and Objectives

This evaluation has summarised how PlayBoard worked from October 2012 – September 2015 to achieve the stated outcomes of the Play Advocacy Programme:

- *Outcome 1:* Strengthening understanding that children and young people are strong, competent social actors in and through their play; that they can effectively participate in decisions about their play; and that play is important for holistic development.
- *Outcome 2:* Strengthening the capacity and ability of key stakeholders to articulate children's and young people's play needs and rights.
- *Outcome 3:* Greater strategic understanding and recognition of the importance of children's and young people's right to play across social policy.
- *Outcome 4:* Enhancing opportunities for play/ supporting play opportunities.

Evidently, it was often necessary to prioritise the achievement of one outcome as a stimulus to the achievement of others. Advocacy work is time and resource intensive. In addition, rooting work in relevant international standards and ensuring the centrality of children's and young people's voices and concerns is crucial for a child rights-based organisation. PlayBoard's work concerning General Comment No. 17 is an excellent example of how these priorities can be achieved effectively.

There is evidence that many recommendations from the previous evaluation were implemented in Phase 2. This evaluation demonstrates that the strategic aim to 'advocate play for social, political and personal change' was achieved through the objectives: 'provide an effective voice for play'; 'inform and influence decision making at all levels'; and 'grow an evidence base for play and practice'. As demonstrated throughout this report, PlayBoard has worked strategically to establish effective alliances and partnerships; share learning; and achieve a balance between proactive and reactive advocacy work, successfully achieving its plans for the second phase of the Play Advocacy Programme.

8.2 Building on Good Practice

The evaluation provided opportunity for key stakeholders to reflect on PlayBoard's work and the approach it adopts. Their perceptions and comments highlighted a wealth of good practice, which should be celebrated and maintained:

Acknowledging PlayBoard's positive reputation: PlayBoard is well respected by those with whom it works. The positive reputation of the organisation was recognised by colleagues in primary schools, Council representatives, academics, other play organisations and government officials:

'Any time an email or information comes from PlayBoard, we know it's good stuff and going to be useful.' (Primary School Principal 1, 'Spaces to Be' Programme)

'PlayBoard ... have delivered an exceptional programme to date. They have met with key objectives and delivered set outcomes throughout. They have understood and utilised the brief to its full potential and their performance has always been recognised through positive evaluations.' (Commissioner of 'My Spaces - Positive Play' Initiative, Derry City Council)

'PlayBoard is a very positive organisation to work with. And they adopt a children's rights perspective, which makes them very easy to work with. The staff are co-operative, helpful, supportive they are good at joining up people and making things happen.' (NICCY representative)

Building on PlayBoard's perceived expertise: Through leading on key issues, hosting and facilitating events, sharing information and knowledge, establishing strategic relationships, providing guidance and training, and delivering programmes, PlayBoard has positioned itself as the lead organisation 'driving the play agenda' in Northern Ireland:

'PlayBoard brought a level of expertise we don't have, and a level of knowledge ... An outsider coming in brought in good practice.' (Principal, 'Positive Playgrounds')

'PlayBoard has been very useful. We're no experts in the area ... They are at the end of the phone when you want advice. They help you find out about expertise from other parts of the world, which makes it easier to lobby ... We very much use PlayBoard as a sounding board, with clout.' (Council representative 1)

'They would be, like, advocates for OFMDFM in terms of any play and leisure policies that we have because they're the experts.' (Junior Minister, OFMDFM)

Capacity building: It is essential to build capacity among diverse groups (including children and young people, those working in the child care and play sectors, the child and youth sectors, voluntary/ community/ statutory sectors) to strengthen understanding about the value of play, and children's play needs and rights. Building capacity enhances advocacy in terms of the pool of those who can advocate plus the power of the advocacy messages. PlayBoard has developed recognised skills in consulting with children and collating evidence to support its advocacy messages. Sharing these skills with member groups and other organisations is a further means of enhancing capacity.

Sustaining involvement in regional networks and forums: Sharing information about play needs and rights through a range of methods and forums ensures wide reach of PlayBoard's key messages. PlayBoard's presence on regional networks and forums ensures that play is on the local advocacy agenda: *'If it wasn't for PlayBoard, play wouldn't get any airtime'* (PlayBoard Board of Directors). Discussion of play in such forums enhances the capacity of other participants to articulate children and young people's play needs and rights.

Promoting partnership working: Cross-organisational working is an effective means of lobbying on particular issues. Working with organisations which have

similar or related concerns, with whom there are established relationships, and who can draw on particular resources or expertise (e.g. use of social media) increases influencing capacity.

Pooling resources: The pooling of resources across organisations and stakeholders has been effective in drawing on different expertise; attaining ‘buy-in’ from key stakeholders; enhancing the sustainability of programmes; strengthening the case for promotion and protection of play rights. Given increasingly limited resources and funding, pooling resources has been a beneficial and strategic move by PlayBoard.

Building and maintaining relationships across a range of sectors: Requiring dedicated time and effort, PlayBoard has successfully built and sustained relationships through information sharing, identifying champions and supporting development of collaborative responses. Defining this ‘co-operative advocacy’, a children’s rights expert noted:

‘... it’s a kind of gentle persuasion - very relationship-based rather than the external NGO “calling to account”. They seem to be very co-operative and to be working in that kind of way. That seems to have worked for them. I’m not saying that would be right for every issue or for every organisation. But it seems to be very effective for them. There’s something in that.’ (Academic 2)

Facilitating a Young Researchers Group: PlayBoard facilitates the youngest peer researcher group in Northern Ireland, and is respected for this achievement. Enabling this work to continue, to ensure that young people are active participants in all stages of research which forms the basis of PlayBoard’s advocacy work (from design to dissemination), will require on-going dedication of resources to support and develop the skills of this group.

Using the power of children’s and young people’s voices to ground advocacy in the issues of concern to them: PlayBoard continues to support children and young people to express and present issues of importance to them through research and consultations. The power and influence of their voices is reflected in the views of those who hear them. Dedicated resources are necessary to continue to build capacity and facilitate the active involvement of children and young people in delivering advocacy messages to decision makers at local and government levels.

Piloting an approach and then replicating successful practice: PlayBoard has a track record of piloting an approach or programme, evaluating success, and then using this as the basis of future work.

Using PlayBoard resources for a range of audiences and for multiple purposes: Development and dissemination of the same Toolkit, poster or document for a range of audiences and purposes demonstrates effective and innovative use of resources, particularly at a time of reduced funding.

Sharing learning: PlayBoard has taken opportunities to share learning from programmes and about the process of grounding campaigns in child and youth research using accessible formats.

Recognising workers' skill and enthusiasm: Interviewees commented on the creativity, fun and motivation provided by PlayBoard staff delivering programmes:

'This was an excellent programme with lovely fun filled people.' (Parent, 'CAN Play' Programme)

'The PlayBoard Officer worked with staff and I recall them playing with clothes pegs – they were all laughing, having fun. That definitely gave an impetus to it, an external boost ... I had a good recommendation from another school, and then had the PlayBoard Officer out ... we learnt and got enthusiasm from her.' (Principal, 'Positive Playgrounds')

Providing a structured programme of work and additional support materials: In its work with schools, PlayBoard not only provided staff with an overview of the Programme but also lesson plans for each session:

'There was a meeting at the beginning of the year where PlayBoard outlined what they had in mind. To be honest, we have more than enough to do so we were more than happy to go along with what they had in mind for the year – and we were more than satisfied with what they had in mind.' (Primary School Principal 2, 'Spaces to Be' Programme)

'The lesson plans for each session were emailed the day before – they can all be used in a different form at a later date.' (Primary School Principal 1, 'Spaces to Be' Programme)

Building on positive involvement in programmes to offer specific training, engage participants in new initiatives and disseminate examples of successful practice: PlayBoard has developed training that can be offered to schools, community based practitioners, member groups and Councils following completion of a specific programme. The organisations with whom PlayBoard has worked are also interested in participating in new projects, and sharing learning:

'We previously had training from PlayBoard for teachers and lunchtime supervisors about how to use the playground. That was brilliant ... PlayBoard has offered us more staff training around playground activities and we plan to take that up later in the year. Any interaction we've had with them, we've been impressed by.' (Primary School Principal 1, 'Spaces to Be' Programme)

'Two member organisations [involved in the 'Inspiring Impact' initiative] had previously received quality assurance training through a different project with PlayBoard and they felt this was a natural progression for them.' (PlayBoard Project Update Report, September 2014 – February 2015: 4)

'We wrote an article for their [PlayBoard's] magazine. That has led to other schools getting in touch to see if it's as good as we say.' (Principal, 'Positive Playgrounds')

Supporting organisational applications for additional funding to consolidate and expand programmes: Positive working relationships and experiences can form

the basis for continuation or extension of programmes through joint funding applications.

Promoting play as a stimulus for inclusion and ‘cross-community’ initiatives: PlayBoard has effectively demonstrated through programmes in schools and communities that play has multiple benefits. In particular, it has been established as an engaging, non-threatening means of promoting inclusion:

‘There are opportunities for play to bring children from different backgrounds together.’ (PlayBoard Board member)

‘If people/kids are using shared space then this will mean people/ kids of all sections will be coming together with a shared and common aim – play and fun.’ (Participant in ‘CAN Play’ Play Leader Training programme)

Using evidence of need and issues identified during consultations with children and those working with them to inform political advocacy work: PlayBoard has gathered information through programme evaluations, consultations, research and needs analysis to develop advocacy messages and deliver these in 1:1 meetings with government officials, presentations, briefings, and reports.

Successfully organising events to raise awareness about specific issues and targeting key personnel: When arranging conferences, seminars and launch events to raise awareness about specific topics or publications, PlayBoard successfully brings together representatives from government, voluntary and community organisations, statutory agencies, academics and other stakeholders.

Inviting Junior Ministers and key civil servants to present at PlayBoard Conferences and events alongside academics or play ‘experts’: Involvement of prominent academics and play ‘experts’ emphasises that PlayBoard’s work is grounded in the latest research and linked to national/ international initiatives. This verifies and reinforces PlayBoard’s messages to politicians, government officials and other key stakeholders.

Facilitating consultations with young children to inform the development of strategies/ policies: PlayBoard has established itself as the ‘go-to’ organisation for consulting with younger children about issues affecting their lives. Its expertise in this area is evidenced in the commissioning of consultations beyond the issue of ‘play’.

Influencing social policy using a broad range of activities: PlayBoard has used several approaches to influence policy development and implementation: sending letters and campaign materials to key individuals such as Ministers and departmental Children’s Champions; presenting to Committees and departmental Strategic Groups; directly engaging in 1:1 meetings with Ministers, Special Advisers and departmental officials or inviting them to events; submitting consultation responses. In these activities, it has drawn out the significance of specific issues to each Department; clarifying how these form part of the Department’s remit and what changes need to occur.

8.3 Potential Developments

Internal PlayBoard Practice

The process of evaluation has prompted consideration of PlayBoard's processes for gathering and analysing information concerning its work. The following suggestions focus on internal procedures aimed at supporting critical analysis of completed work in terms of achievement of intended outcomes and impact.

Continuing development of data collection processes so that all staff are clear about what needs to be recorded, why, and how information might be used:

- Clarifying the difference between 'outputs' (tangible products) and 'outcomes' (intended changes)
- Linking analysis of information gathered to intended outcomes (ie which outcome(s) does this information demonstrate achievement of?)
- Using information gathered to describe the process (ie this is what we did and how we did it)
- Collating and providing evidence of impact (ie this is what changed)
- Considering how information collected can be used for multiple purposes.

Continuing to record and analyse evidence within all programmes: Time needs to be allocated for this process at regular intervals. PlayBoard staff regularly should collect information about the impact and perceived value of their activities to evaluate and adapt content and/or methods if necessary. This should involve following-up with stakeholders about the impact of attending events and receiving resources (e.g. in terms of learning, informing their views and understanding, influencing the focus and approach adopted in their own work).

Intended outcomes should be clearly identified and shared with all partners when programmes are established: In particular, 'strengthening understanding that ... play is important for holistic development' (Outcome 1) should be central to all programmes and interactions with schools, Councils, communities, practitioners and policy-makers.

Programme evaluations should include evidence about perceived impacts concerning the advocacy-related outcomes: For example, evaluations should note increased understanding about the importance of play for children's holistic development (Outcome 1) or increased capacity to articulate children's play needs and rights (Outcome 2) amongst participants in work with schools, Councils and communities, in addition to comments about how enjoyable the programme has been or perceived personal/ organisational impacts.

Potential opportunities for influencing policy and practice should be identified during the planning stage of any programme: The planning process for any programme should include consideration of opportunities to affect policy and/or practice, so that evidence is gathered while the programme is implemented as well as during evaluations.

On-going tracking and follow-up of PlayBoard consultation responses is required: As noted in the previous evaluation, it is important to assess whether any

recommendations made in PlayBoard's consultation responses have actually been implemented, and to record subsequent changes to policy/ practice.

Work with External Organisations and Bodies

Analysis of completed work and feedback from key stakeholders has highlighted areas for potential development of PlayBoard's work with external organisations and bodies:

Explaining how and why PlayBoard is 'Northern Ireland's lead organisation for children and young people's play': One interviewee questioned whether PlayBoard can claim to be the sole or main organisation concerned with play: 'A concern is that PlayBoard have set themselves up as "the voice of play" ... But they have no statutory responsibility ... They have to sustain themselves, doing Council work and so on ... who says they are the voice of play?' It would be helpful for the organisation to describe explicitly how it fulfils this role, particularly in information provided to Councils.

Evidencing how play can provide a stimulus for promoting community relations: PlayBoard has demonstrated how play can be used to promote cross-community interaction and there is potential for this work to be further developed both in schools and with Councils.

Developing a form of accreditation for organisations which have developed creative, innovative play opportunities: Some form of accreditation could be designed for the schools, community groups, childcare providers, and other organisations which have created different forms of play aimed at prompting use of the imagination, risk-taking, collaboration.

Promoting PlayBoard's work through community planning: Community planning provides a basis for PlayBoard's work with communities and Councils, particularly in relation to protection of play spaces and development of play opportunities responsive to local community needs. This would reinforce the promotion of play as a vehicle for recognising the significance of children as active participants in their communities.

Supporting Councils to recognise the value of play: PlayBoard has a key role through conducting local consultations and audits of need, suggesting creative ideas beyond fixed play parks, and emphasising how play can be championed.

Supporting Councils to lobby for the allocation of resources to appoint Designated Play Officers and Play Development Officers: A Council representative suggested that PlayBoard could have 'a bona fide role providing training and expertise for all Play Development Officers'. Funded by local authorities, this would ensure consistency across Councils.

Continuing to challenge the 'risk averse' assumptions of parents, schools, Councils and others working with children/ young people: PlayBoard should continue to promote outdoor play as an important aspect of holistic development and the benefits of risk-taking, using the Play Safety Forum and Northern Ireland Health

and Safety Executive Joint Statement: *Children's play and leisure: Promoting a balanced approach* to support these arguments.

Strengthening the potential for sustainability of programmes/ practice: PlayBoard has been working closely with communities, schools and Councils to achieve this objective. Greater involvement of parents, carers, children and young people (evidenced in the previous evaluation report), is likely to further enhance outcomes and long-term impacts.

Considering how PlayBoard can contribute to the development of all-Ireland play advocacy work: There is potential for further liaison with communities in the Republic of Ireland about addressing lack of play opportunities in local areas.

Building on ad hoc work: Given that PlayBoard has a track record of utilising resources for multiple purposes, some areas of work that occur on a more ad hoc basis might be further developed.

Continuing to share learning about PlayBoard's advocacy work: PlayBoard successfully shares learning within the child, youth and play sectors about play-related policy and practice. However, learning about its advocacy work could have wider resonance: *'It's an example not just for play advocacy, it's for every advocacy – if you do this and if you do it in this way, it can be a really effective thing'* (Academic 2 discussing advocacy work in relation to General Comment No. 17). This includes ensuring that children and young people receive feedback about their contributions to consultations and how these influenced decisions.

Continuing to use the media, including social media, to promote key messages: In terms of advocacy work, the Director of Play Scotland commented *'You can't be a purist. You have to be flexible so that you can pick up the opportunity to get a big audience'*. She proposed that organisations have to *'make the most of the media to have their messages heard'*. This may mean, for example, agreeing to participate in a radio discussion about one topic and then *'turning it round to something positive, so that people start using your language back at you (e.g. "risk benefit")'*. Use of social networking was also promoted as a way of targeting parents with information and play ideas. *E-Play* has proved to be a very successful form of communication, valued by a range of stakeholders.

Continuing to identify the wider value of play: At a time of austerity and cuts to public funding PlayBoard can emphasise, and illustrate through examples, that much of its work is not expensive, and that investment in play has a range of positive outcomes (e.g. improving health and well-being, promoting inclusion, supporting personal/ social/ educational development).

Continuing to identify 'play champions' in government departments, proactively engaging with them when policies/ strategies/ funding opportunities are being developed as well as when they have been produced: Consolidating positive relationships with politicians and departmental officials, PlayBoard should continue to influence social policy development at its earliest stages in addition to submitting responses to government consultation documents and then monitoring the implementation of final policies.

Continuing to lobby about implementation of the ‘Play Policy Statement’ and ‘Play and Leisure Implementation Plan’: PlayBoard’s advocacy work in relation to the *Play and Leisure Implementation Plan* should continue to emphasise allocation of funding to support delivery through the cross-departmental ‘Delivering Social Change’ framework and ‘Programme for Government’.

Continuing advocacy work to address the issues raised within the ‘Northern Ireland NGO Alternative Report’ to the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child: Play and leisure often are not considered essential services and, without consistent lobbying, are likely to slip from the policy agenda (particularly during the current period of austerity). PlayBoard’s role and contribution will be vital in maintaining a focus on promoting/ protecting children’s play needs and rights.

Continuing to promote and protect children’s play needs and rights: The UK Government (including devolved administrations) will be examined by the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child in May/June 2016. In addition to UNCRC Article 31 and General Comment No. 17, the Committee’s Concluding Observations and any play-related recommendations will provide the basis for lobbying about children’s right to play.